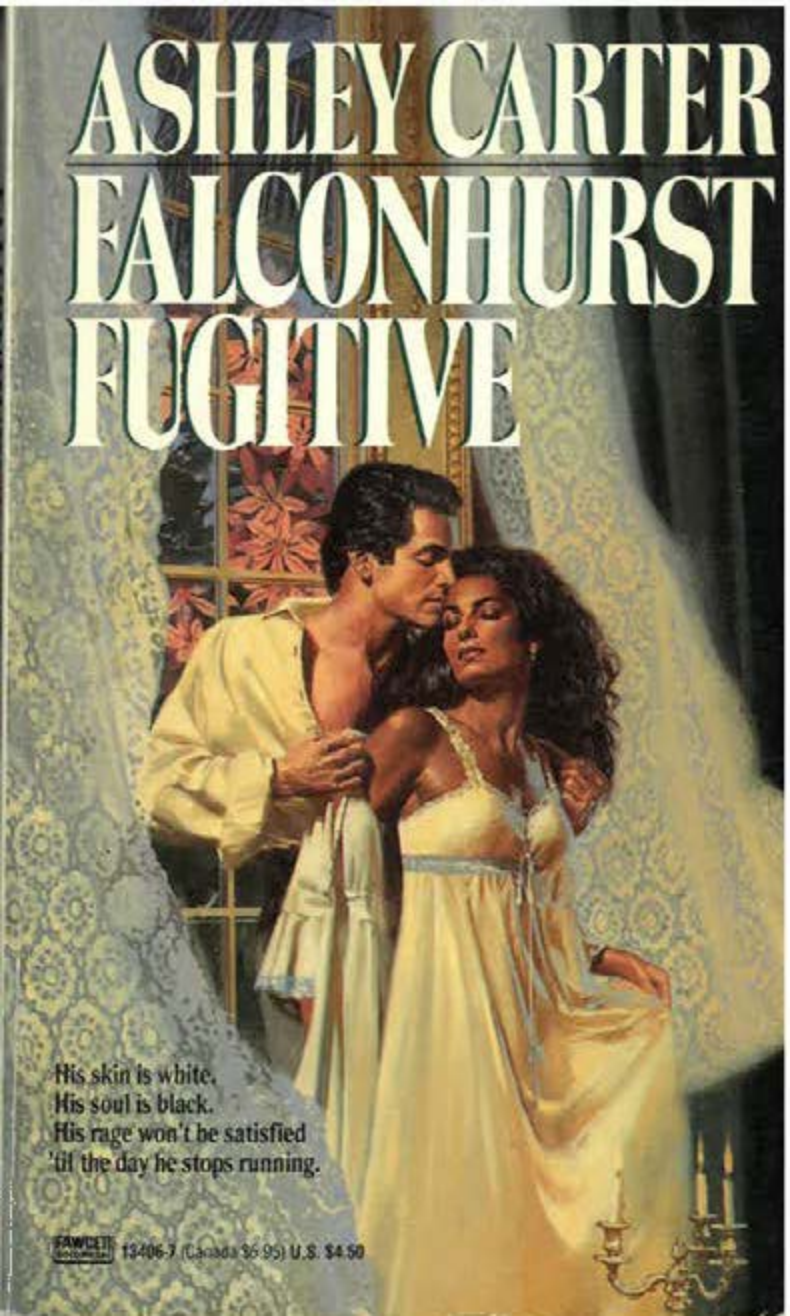
ASHLEY CARTER

FALCONHURST FUGITIVE



His skin is white.
His soul is black.
His rage won't be satisfied
'til the day he stops running.

FAWCETT 13406-7 (Canada $6.95) U.S. $4.50

BETWEEN BLACK AND WHITE, ONE CONSUMING PASSION...

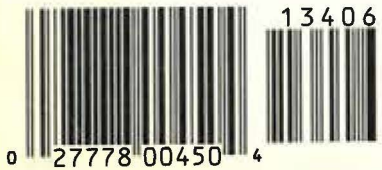
The world calls him Tommy Verder, white man. But his real name is Calico—born to be used as a black male animal—and he's a fugitive Falconhurst slave with a price on his head.

His refuge is the bed of a rich New Orleans lady. His vow is to escape his slave nightmare—to stride, head held high, among the rich and elite.

Yet, forced to kill a man and to flee once again, Calico learns firsthand about real terror on the island of Haiti, where fanatic injustice and heartless law rule the land.

Here, where real zombies stalk the hot voodoo nights and a treasure in Inca gold sparks an orgy of bloodlust, Calico faces two formidable enemies: the diabolical dandy, Jean Pierre Sardou; and the incredible beauty Jade, as erotically insatiable as any woman alive, more treacherous and ruthless than any person on earth....

A BLAZING AND EXOTIC ADVENTURE IN THE SWEEPING FALCONHURST TRADITION



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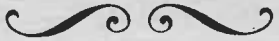

He fell asleep at last, exhausted by his own needs and dreams. The dark night continued loud with birds and drums and prowling creatures. He did not know how long he slept, or what wakened him. It was a subtle change in the very atmosphere of his room. There was a crackling charge of electricity in the air, as if just before a violent storm. He no longer smelled the cool fresh linens. Not even the jasmine was as pervasive. He smelled a faint and yet unforgettable cologne, the warmth of a young body, the musk of dark, shampooed hair, the sweet breath of the very young. He opened his eyes slowly, thinking he was dreaming anyhow.

Jade lay close beside him. His eyes opened wider. He saw her black hair spilled out across the mattress beside him, the ceramic-smooth glaze of her face, the unutterable loveliness of her features, and even then he could not believe it. She wore only a diaphanous silk and lace gown which whispered against the rises and planes of her shapely body.

When Jade saw that he was awake, she smiled, faintly and pleasurably. She whispered. "Bon soir, M'sieu. Couchez-vous, avec moi?"

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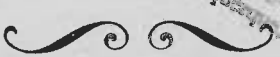

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FALCONHURST FUGITIVE

Ashley Carter

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And, once more,
for Kathryn. . . .

PROLOGUE

He awoke from the recurring nightmare, sweated and exhausted. He could not explain his sense of dread, even to himself, a dream as simple as it was terrifying.

A man running. . . .

It was as if the form were glimpsed from a great distance, an indistinct, tiny, and faceless figure in a strange, blinding light, across a vast vista which never changed, no matter how swiftly the scatterling ran. It seemed impossible at such an extreme range, and yet he recognized the fleeing quarry. He knew that runner, even when he couldn't reach him, couldn't help him, couldn't even shout out a warning to him. It was he, and he'd been running all his life and was too tired to run anymore, but if he stopped running, if he slowed down even to rest for a moment, the terror would overtake him, his unseen pursuers would capture and chain him, they would cut out his tongue, brand him with a white-hot *R* across his forehead, weld a ring through his manhood, or hang him from a rope-scarred tree. Like that migrant bird doomed never to roost but forever to sleep only in flight, and always half-awake, he existed in tormented passage.

He sat up and swung his feet over the side of the high mattress. He reached out, found a long-stemmed vesta, scratched a fire and lit a bedside taper from its blaze. The old Seth Thomas wall clock across the room reflected just enough lamp glow to show him it was four o'clock. The darkest hour before dawn. He shivered, because it seemed to him this was the place where he lived out his life, in those darkest shadows of the threatening dark.

He felt the frantic thudding of his heart slowing gradually as he recognized the plush furnishings of this opulent bedroom which once had been the domain of aristocratic plantation owner Manfred-Tom Casale. Damask drapes were drawn over the tall windows, like barricades against the outside world. A Casale forebear gazed disdainfully down from an oil painting that dominated an inner wall. The four-postered, maple-wood bed, with its high canopy, was like piled down, with silken sheets and satin coverlets and huge overstuffed pillows. The carpeting and foot warmers and dressers and mirrors all had been imported from France. Every appurtenance in this master suite had been created, designed, and organized to enhance creature comfort. Yet, alone in here, he felt as if he crouched in some forlorn and drafty prison.

He exhaled heavily. Though he had every reason to shout in exultance at this ease and comfort and elegance, he could not easily escape the lashings of the nightmare that had brought him running south, headed toward New Orleans, when all reason warned him to run north, where at least he could exist as an equal among men of whatever color or creed. Despite the fantastic splendor of this place, he could not escape the instinctive sense that he'd made the wrong turn one more time. He was thankful for only one thing. Despite the fearful dreams that haunted his nights, he was able to rest, to escape even for a little while the old, dangerous masquerade that had brought him to the brink of death, with Hammond Maxwell's bullet in his gut.

He looked about the furbished elegance and imposingly embellished bedroom in helpless savagery, like a cornered puma suffocating in luxurious sanctuary. He shuddered with something he'd long ago learned he had to conceal if he was to stay alive: fear.

He tried to reason with himself. What was there to fear in this elegant retreat? Yet, he was afraid because somehow it seemed that Hammond Maxwell was meant by the gods to be his personal avenging angel. Hammond's bullet hadn't killed him this time, but it had ended one more masquerade in a life of lies and betrayals and false pretenses, of staying alive through cunning, of walking with bravado in the sun and cringing in the dark like a trapped thief. All the time he knew his crime was in his blood; he was a black man who looked

white and, tempted, tried to live in the white world. He'd starred in the brightest footlights of that riverboat revue, pretending to be the famous Broadway actor Desmond Payne, until Ham Maxwell shot at him from the audience, setting his belly afire and sending him running in the darkness one more time, with Maxwell himself in furious pursuit. He'd begun to believe that Hammond had been commissioned by the offended gods themselves to the divine mission of eradicating an ungodly black who dared raise his head high enough to look for happiness in a white man's society.

"Tommy."

Startled, Tommy shuddered so violently pain exploded in the ill-healing bullet wound low in his side. He pressed his hand over the gauze-bandaged fire and jerked his head up.

The woman, fragrant, full-breasted, and svelte in a diaphanous nightgown, dark gold hair loose about her shoulder blades, stood in the doorway. She dampened her lips with her tongue, dream-sodden, sleep-warm, and smiling. Tommy felt that old, sudden, and irresistible twist of longing deep in his loins, because in these past weeks, in this splendid haven, he'd learned what madness drove her when she came into his arms and into his bed.

He grinned faintly. He'd had women all his life, from slave girls to Boston society matrons and back. All of them had been anxious, some even frantic, to please him, but no one, not even Miss Dovie back home at Dovecote Plantation, had been so dedicated, driven, and inspired to arousing, gratifying, and satisfying his wildest fantasies. Sometimes Anne-Jeanne wanted more when he was trembling with fatigue.

"Anne-Jeanne." He spoke softly, voice controlled, with a smile no woman had ever resisted. "What are you doing awake at this ungodly hour?"

Anne-Jeanne Casale licked her tongue across her lips again, and it was clear enough what she wanted, all right. He was exhausted and shaken from the violence of his nightmare, and only newly recovered from her most recent sweet assault. Their lovemaking began in a wild embrace on the carpeting of her sun room and ended in her own bed less than two hours ago. He brushed that aside. He had been alone in here with his Furies; he did not want to exist in that lonely cold again

the rest of this night. Perhaps he had only this moment, but when he died, his memories would be pleasant.

He smiled invitingly and put out his arms to her.

"Couldn't sleep," he said. "Bad dreams."

"I couldn't sleep, either," Anne-Jeanne said, "but because my dreams were too good. They were all of you. They kept waking me up."

Anne-Jeanne came into his arms, somehow freeing the lace straps at her shoulders so that her transparent nightgown melted along her body to a warm pile of fabric about her feet.

Tommy grinned, watching the lady of this mansion. Anne-Jeanne resented anything, even the rich, soft materials of her gown, intruding between her body and his. She wanted Tommy to look at her, as she longed to gaze at him, to marvel at his lean, hard body and to revel in it. But he wore a hip-length nightshirt and, though Anne-Jeanne pulled at it, kissing him, he blew out the bedside candle before he let her remove that last garment. She tugged it over his head and threw it behind her in a heap upon the flooring. Her palms stroked and caressed and wandered over the heated musculature of his chest and thighs.

"Why must we always love only in darkness?" Anne-Jeanne whispered, puzzled but not complaining, because she was far too aroused in his embrace to complain. "You know how I love to look at you."

Tommy swallowed back the bile of savage laughter. There was one good and unholy reason why Anne-Jeanne—or any other white woman—must never see him naked in any light. Aye God, there was—a little matter of existence. That reason was his piebald belly and back that had gotten him registered at birth as black male animal Calico. What would Anne-Jeanne Casale say if she knew his real name was Calico, and that he was a fugitive Falconhurst slave with a price on his head?

He closed his arms more tightly upon her, as if trying to deny his own past, to blur it from his mind. His father was a white man, unknown to him. His mother was Fronie, an octoroon, a slave for life at Dovecote Plantation. No matter how white he appeared, no matter how insignificant any gram of black blood in his veins, the laws certified him Negroid.

Sure, Anne-Jeanne Casale professed her passion and devo-

tion and desire for him at least a dozen times a day. She screamed out her undying love when she lay frenzied in his arms. But he wondered bitterly what would happen to that enchantment if she ever saw his spotted belly, his speckled back—two signs that stamped him Negro, no matter the fairness of his flesh, the classic, old-coin cut of his features, the sharp lines of his full lips. It was one thing to suggest that if Anne-Jeanne truly loved him, the color of his skin wouldn't matter. He knew better. In the repressed Southron society where Anne-Jeanne had been reared, blacks were animals, beasts of burden who could talk, lower than the apes, mud-sills of civilization to be despised, feared, denigrated, enslaved, but forever kept in their lowly place. In her world, a black man could be hung for daring to look a white woman full in the face.

With savagery born only half of desire, he drew her upon him. She trembled, responding to the passion she felt charging through his hands.

"Why won't you let me look at you?" Anne-Jeanne persisted. "Such a wonderful, colossal column of manhood! Oh, I can never look at him enough. Looks like you'd be proud of such endowment."

Again, Tommy bit back bitter laughter. Proud? God knew, he was proud of his magnificent maulstick. Why shouldn't he be proud of that distinctive club nature had bestowed so generously upon him? Maybe this had been the malicious gods' way of making up for his piebald body. He was proud of his manhood, even if he could not let Anne-Jeanne gaze in fascination upon it as she desired in full lamplight. This didn't mean he wasn't proud, because he was. Goddamned proud.

Anne-Jeanne slipped into the bed beside him, kissing him with her liquid hot mouth parted. Her tongue moved over his throat and chest muscles and paps, her hands massaging more fiercely than even she realized at his thighs. Breathless, she whispered, "Do you believe in God, Tommy?"

"Right now I do." His voice was fervent.

She looked up from kissing him, her hair about her face, a curtain across her eyes. "I believe in God. More than ever now that you've come here to me. I believe God directs our

lives, takes care of us against all evil, his eye on every sparrow.''

He laughed coldly. ''I think we're all toys for wanton, drunken gods who torment mortals to amuse themselves.''

She laughed. ''You're teasing me. I know you don't mean that.''

''It's all I've ever learned about your God—or my gods. They're vicious, and man's made in their image.''

''Oh, my poor, dear Tommy.'' She kissed him with sudden gentleness, as if wanting to protect him, even from himself. ''You have had such an unhappy life, haven't you?''

''I'm happy right now.'' He moved his hand, almost roughly, into the hot and liquid triangle of femininity at her thighs.

She gasped, catching her breath and opening her body to him. When she spoke she was more breathless than ever. He was afraid she was not going to be able to breathe at all. ''Oh, so am I. I am happier than I have ever been, happier than I ever thought I could be. And for that, I thank God. True love is a gift of heaven.''

He moved his hands upon her, and she drew her parted lips downward across his chest. She nursed his paps hungrily and let the tresses of her hair caress the planes of his flat belly as she drew her tongue downward over him, devouring him. She tilted her head slightly, her face hidden now. ''Don't you believe God brought us together?''

He exhaled in sweet agony. ''I thank God for you,'' he whispered. ''And for what you are about to do.''

''Amen,'' she said, thrusting herself in bittersweet fury upon him in the fiery darkness. . . .

During the daylight hours, plus those passionate moments in Anne-Jeanne's voluptuous arms, Tommy forgot his terrors. The evil threat and the ugly memories paled slightly, and he was almost happy and untroubled for the first time in his life. Maybe Ham Maxwell's bullet had been a stroke of good luck in disguise. It had ended one masquerade, and he had entered into another here at Meadow Leas, but he felt loved in this place: wanted, protected, and secure.

There was nothing in this paradise to fear or to hate. Anne-Jeanne Casale had been reared in the kind of luxury that made her soft, warmhearted, and loving. She mistrusted no

one. She was kindly, and she wanted for him the kind of genteel life he could not fault, or ever want to leave. She was smart enough to know what she had, and she wanted to hang on to it.

What was there about this life to disparage? Obsequious black boys wakened Tommy gently sometime during the morning by opening drapes at the floor-to-ceiling east windows and flooding the room with saffron Louisiana sunlight. The serving lads poured steaming hot water into a freestanding brass tub, then departed. Tommy climbed into the tub and laved himself with soft soapy cloths. When he had rinsed himself twice with fresh tepid water, he scrubbed himself dry with thick, sweet-smelling towels. The boys brought him hot fresh coffee which he drank in his underwear, standing at the open window and breathing in the clover-laden, jasmine-tinged breezes and enjoying the far-flung vistas of Meadow Leas. The boys laid out his clothes and when they had dressed him, they worked his feet into freshly cleaned, waxed, polished, and perfumed boots. He grinned crookedly. He smelled good from head to toe. The world around him smelled good, a clean and gentle and satisfactory place. In those luxurious moments, the richest man on earth had no more than he.

Each morning Anne-Jeanne awaited him at breakfast on the east terrace. Shaded by magnificent white cucumber trees and hedged in from the world by jasmine hedges, fragrant and bee-pocked, they sat at a glass-topped, wrought-iron table that Anne-Jeanne told him her late husband had imported from Holland.

The food was superbly prepared, stunning for a man who had spent most of his youth wolfing down runny grits and fatback, washed down by chickory coffee, on his way to his chores. Here, his heaviest chore consisted of smiling upon the lovely widow, nodding as she chattered toward him, and suffering the caress and stroking of her hand when the servants were not near. And the food! Fruit in season not only graced the table, but smothered it. Milk, fresh from the milking barns and the cooling grottoes twenty feet below the kitchen, glittered blue-white in sweated lead-crystal tumblers. Pancakes were served once a week, but they were so light in texture as to seem almost of spun webbing, of a uniform

golden color, and the batter was sweetened with honey until the cakes had the flavor of waffles. Eggs were coddled, poached, and never fried, sometimes lightly scrambled, and served under sterling silver covers. Lean ham, golden fried chicken, and fluffy biscuits smoked temptingly from heavy serving trays.

"Do you know what I think would be fun, Tommy?" Anne-Jeanne said one morning, beaming as she watched him devour his coddled eggs.

He glanced up and grinned at her. He had a pretty good idea what Anne-Jeanne considered fun, but he shrugged and said, "What would be fun?"

"A shopping trip to New Orleans. A real two- or three-week safari down into the city. You and I. And only the fewest servants necessary, of course."

"Oh, of course," Tommy said.

"I love to go shopping in New Orleans. Manfred-Tom took me to Paris once. I went insane, truly insane, shopping over there. But New Orleans is a kind of provincial Paris, don't you think?"

"Oh, I'm sure it must be."

"And a trip to New Orleans with you! I almost faint in excitement just at the thought! What a lovely couple we'll make. The way people will turn their heads and stare. How proud I'll be to show you off. We'll stay at the Hotel St. Louis, in the French Quarter. All the truly genteel plantation people stay there. Some of those dowdy old women will just turn green with envy when they see me with my hand on your arm. And you'll have to forgive the way my smile will be so possessive."

"I already forgive you."

She caught his hand in both of hers and kissed it violently, then nursed each of his fingers, her head tilted coquettishly, watching him. "Would you like to, Tommy?"

"Like to what?" he teased her.

She laughed. "Go to new Orleans with me?"

"Oh, my mind wandered when you started sucking on my fingers."

She laughed again and kissed the palm of his hand. "Oh, I've never been so happy. Never even knew I could be so

happy. You do want to go to New Orleans with me, don't you, Tommy? You—wouldn't be ashamed of me?"

"Ashamed? My God, you look like a gentle and lovely queen. How could I ever be ashamed?"

"Because you are so handsome. So young and handsome and beautiful. A young god . . . Oh, I'll be so proud of you. We'll see the opera, and all the shows. And they have a show in the Quarter that Manfred-Tom told me about. He would never take me there, but you will, won't you, Tommy?"

"If you want to go."

"Manfred-Tom said I wouldn't be protected in such a place. But you'd protect me, wouldn't you, Tommy?"

"My God, what kind of show is it?"

"You know," she said. "They have girls who dance naked, and men and women who put on sex shows—right on the stage—right in front of everybody." She shivered. "And Manfred-Tom said one woman comes out onstage with—a pony! Can you believe that, Tommy? A pony?"

"I'd never have believed this was a show you'd want to see."

"Oh, I'd love it. With you there. To protect me. Beside me. To enjoy it with me . . . I never knew too much about—sensual excitement—until you came along, Tommy. . . . Shall we go? Soon?"

Tommy shrugged, slouching in his chair. "As soon as you wish. Your desire is my command, my lady, though I should be getting on my way before too long."

Anne-Jeanne looked as if she might cry. "I won't hear of it. Please don't talk about it. Don't even think it . . . Haven't you been happy here?"

"There is the matter of my life."

"Whatever you want, Tommy, it is here at Meadow Leas for you. By now, I know, that despite your money and your male beauty, you haven't had a happy life. That's why I want you to be happy here at Meadow Leas. I want you to have every good thing I can give you."

"Oh, I have that all right," he said, kissing her hand.

Anne-Jeanne stroked his face, smiling. "Then it's settled. We'll go soon to New Orleans. I'll tell the servants. We'll both buy whole wardrobes of clothes—and there are so many things I want to buy for you, Tommy. I want to cover you

with gifts. I want to show you how much I do love you." She sighed and her eyes darkened. "But we must go soon, before the cholera season starts down there. I live in terror of Bronze John. I've seen people turn black and die in their own vomit. The ugliest way I know to die."

"I reckon there to be few pretty ways," Tommy said.

She shuddered. "But cholera. Nobody knows what causes it, no one has any idea how to cure it! That's why I would never live down in New Orleans, why I go only in those seasons when there is no cholera epidemic." She shook her head and her eyes filled with tears. "Cholera killed Manfred-Tom," she said. "He was so young—not as young as you—but vigorous and strong. . . . Not as vigorous and strong as you—"

"I'm sorry to hear he died in such agony."

She covered her face with her hands, trying to blot out the memory. "It is a scourge of God. It's communicable. That means it has to be worse in a town as crowded as New Orleans, a place where the canals are open sewers."

After breakfast, Anne-Jeanne changed her dress and they promenaded through her lush, carefully manicured gardens, shaded by great spreading water oaks and tupelos. The place was an ever changing riot of colors, of reds and yellows and lavendar, of chrysanthemums, carnations, azaleas, asters, and verbena. She breathed deeply, smiling at the beauty, and Tommy kept seeing the tons of fertilizer, the gallons of black sweat it took to keep this garden bright.

She sat with him in the open gazebo in a cross-hatching of morning sunlight. She stroked his upper leg with her avid hands, closing her fingers on him. "My whole life is like a honeymoon," she whispered. "I can't touch you enough. I can't love you enough. This beautiful garden makes it all seem so much lovelier, as if it were made for us."

He smiled and drew her close against him, trying to forget when he had slaved as her blacks labored to produce this beauty. Once he had been the slave Calico, toting the Dummy around on his back all day long, like some horrible albatross. Such exertion had been a good foundation for the thick muscles in his shoulders, arms, and thighs, a strangely disguised blessing.

He refused to think about it. All that was another world, a world of Falconhurst Plantation, where he and Hammond Maxwell had played together as boys. He'd liked Ham, and they were about the same age. And though there was that uncrossable gulf between them—of white master and black slave—they had been childhood friends. He and Ham had shared the first black wench he'd ever had, a faceless, nameless hussy he had never forgotten. Who would believe that Hammond could forget their friendship and come after him with hang rope and gun? Well, this only proved that nothing lasted. A man had to enjoy what the gods meted to him, while he could.

He glanced at Anne-Jeanne, finding her beautiful in her bright-colored hoopskirt and low-bodiced waist, and the colorful parasol between her ceramic complexion and the sun. Aye God, he would enjoy while he could.

After lunch, Anne-Jeanne changed into fashionable riding habit and they rode together on thoroughbred Tennessee Morgan horses, with black servants at a respectful distance in their wake. The slaves carried cool fruit ades, sandwiches, and oranges for a picnic.

Another afternoon they might enjoy a leisurely drive in a single-seat runabout with fringed top, and a black servant with his legs hanging over the tailgate.

The only troublesome aspect to these drives were the other homes and plantations they passed. Anne-Jeanne wanted to show him off, retell his heroics on the day they met—how she owed her life to him, how he'd saved her from a fate worse than death, how he was to be her houseguest indefinitely. All these plantation people accepted him unquestioningly because they accepted Anne-Jeanne Casale as the richest woman in the parish, the most respected, and now, she told Tommy joyously, the most envied.

Tommy felt the faintly accelerated pumping of his heart in all the fine homes they visited. He kept looking for danger in the eyes of every man. He could not shake the sense that doom for him and Anne-Jeanne lay in their socializing with outsiders, no matter how courteous and warm they smiled. When they drove out of these great estates, he always felt as if he were escaping something, even when he could not say what.

It took them a long time simply to cover the three thousand acres of prime, silt-rich cotton, cane, and farmland Anne-Jeanne had inherited, along with one hundred slaves, from her husband. He sat beside her in the buggy and watched black men and women, backs bent as they weeded or picked cotton in sun-broiled fields. Other blacks tended sheep, horses, cattle, goats, and hogs. Beyond the stables were the craft shops, where cobblers and tailors and seamstresses worked. With black, implacable, and unyielding overseers, Meadow Leas was self-sustaining. They could live almost entirely off the land of the estate. There were even hundreds of acres allowed to lie fallow, and other hundreds of timberlands. Meadow Leas was a world in itself, and Tommy found this reassuring.

When Tommy first arrived at Meadow Leas, Anne-Jeanne took him along with her to the Casale family cemetery, on a knoll a mile above the river. She delivered fresh-cut flowers to the grave of Manfred-Tom every day. She sat on a white wrought-iron bench in the shadow of a pine and simply stared at the great marble headstone marked with Manfred-Tom's birth and death dates, and carrying her name and birth date, with a space waiting only for her death.

They made this pilgrimage less and less frequently, until at last, Anne-Jeanne sent flowers by black messenger. "I'm not ready to die, Tommy," she said. "I don't like to look at my name on that great marble slab. . . . I didn't mind before. It was comforting. But now it makes me feel old. And I'm not old. I'm alive. I hate that place—even when you're there beside me."

Instead of the visits to the burial grounds, Anne-Jeanne put on a simple, ankle-length cotton skirt without stays or hoops, a great straw sun hat, and they paddled in a canoe on the placid surface of her private lake. Somehow Tommy liked this place best of all. Cedars, pines, water oaks, and willows grew around the sun-speckled water like parapets, walls against the outside world. Anne-Jeanne loved to lie with her head in his lap, her face protected under her straw hat, as he paddled lazily across the unruffled sheeting of black water, and he liked to have her there.

In a few weeks, Tommy adjusted to the ease and beauty and serenity of life at Meadow Leas. He was happy, almost

content. In the evenings, after dinner, she played love songs on the spinet. Her favorite was "Kind, Kind and Gentle Was She." She sang it softly and sweetly, but its lyrics made her cry, and crying sent her into his arms, and in his arms she caught fire, and she grasped his hands in hers, drawing him after her up to her bed.

It was in heated, wondrous times like these that he almost forgot the evil in his past, when he decided that the prize was worth the cost, whatever it proved to be. At such high-hearted moments, he sent up silent prayers of thanksgiving to some unknown African god of his people, some voodoo-tinged, savage-hearted, cannabalistic deity who boiled up vaulting ambition in his restive blood and made him different. He thanked those prankish gods for making him white. Thanked all the gods! What a hellish joke his white skin was on all these prejudiced Southerners, and he rejoiced in it, despite his nightmares. He kept his black blemishes hidden, because this was all part of the game.

He'd been playing these unholy games with white people, in the white man's world, since Miss Dovie's father had bought him from the Maxwells of Falconhurst Plantation. Old Verder had taken him to Dovecote Plantation as body servant to the real Tommy Verder, who was called the Dummy because he could neither speak nor hear. Only Calico could communicate with young Tommy. When Miss Dovie, the real Tommy's mother, learned that Tommy's hearing could be improved, which in turn would allow him to speak and lead a normal life, she had sent the Dummy to Wainwright School in Boston, along with Calico, whom they renamed Calvin, for his new life in the North. Calvin and Tommy had arrived at Wainwright School with their identities mysteriously exchanged, and so Calico's life of masquerade and duplicity was incubated.

Tommy grinned wryly, remembering. The Verders had sent north two apparently white boys and enrolled them at Wainwright as twin brothers. They resembled each other stunningly, though no one could say why, unless one had been acquainted with an older cousin Tommy Verder. It had begun simply enough because Calico hated the prim name Calvin, as he hated enslavement. Being Tommy seemed the finest thing possible, as well as a step forward in the white world. Besides the Dummy didn't care what people called

him; he couldn't hear them anyway. So he, the one who could speak and hear, announced that he was Tommy Verder and that the poor dummy with him was his twin brother, Calvin.

That first winter in Boston had been disastrously cold and wet. The Dummy caught pneumonia and died before he ever learned to put words together in sentences, or hear himself fart. The Wainwright School had helped Calico by writing home to Miss Dovie the sad news that Calvin Verder had passed away. Miss Dovie continued to send a hundred dollars a month to pay her Tommy's tuition and board. The money continued coming even after he left the school.

Tired of the North, hating the winters, he'd longed to return south, but he'd been afraid to try it. He had gone to New York and failed at everything he attempted, except living as Tommy Verder. He was accepted as a white man in the white man's society. By changing identities, he had freed himself—and set himself on a mad race against doom.

He lost every job until he found his true vocation. He could handle women, he could get them to do anything he wanted. He set himself up in business in the Five Points section of Manhattan. By the time he was twenty-one he was master and pimp for a stable of three whores who regularly insisted upon turning every penny of their earnings over to him in exchange for his pleasuring and pampering them. Not only was he built like a stud, but he tried to please them and to give them complete satisfaction. This was a simple secret damned few men ever learned. His three hussies were forever pleading with him to remove all his clothing, but he refused, sometimes angrily. Those ugly piebald splotches were his own secret. Those calico spots would never betray his black ancestry. He kept this evidence hidden as long as he could.

Tommy sighed heavily. He might never have returned south at all but for trouble over his women. The mob wanted them. When he refused to relinquish them, the mob came after him. He had run for his life—back to Dovecote Plantation. He had returned as Miss Dovie's dear son, a free white man named Tommy Verder. She had believed his masquerade, and even when she learned the truth about who he really was, Miss Dovie took him into her bed as her lover. He had nothing to fear from her. She'd never betray him as long as

he kept her happy. But then he'd reached higher into the white man's world, deciding to take a plantation heiress as his bride. He learned quickly that Missy Acker was man-crazy, but by then the belle had her hooks in him. He'd been too smart for New York mobsters. He was no match for the eager Missy Acker. But on their wedding night she had seen those piebald spots. She screamed hysterically. She had married a black man. All hell broke loose and he was on the run again, accused of raping Missy Acker. The marriage was quickly dissolved, and Hammond Maxwell himself led the vigilante posse seeking him.

For a while he'd found sanctuary and disguise on Captain Andy's riverboat, *The Dixie Blossom Showboat*, as Desmond Payne, actor. But like some fated nemesis, Hammond Maxwell appeared, maddened and obsessed, in the audience. Shot in the side, sick and exhausted, Tommy had run once more, finally resigned to admitting he was black. He was tired of breaking his own heart—running and hiding and looking forever over his shoulder. He would accept what he was. Then he had met Anne-Jeanne Casale, and she made the game worthwhile one more time.

He was striding with white arrogance again, driving beside Anne-Jeanne in her runabout, head tilted, white planter's hat at a rakish angle, knowing how good he looked to the lady of the manor and what a beautiful couple they made, turning heads wherever they went.

This was the life. This made the danger palatable. God damn it, he could never live as a bondsman again, a subhuman animal to be used, misused, sold, beaten, subjected to the whims and foibles of some stupid white master or domineering white mistress. He had served his term walking around with the Dummy's legs locked chokingly about his throat while he toted him on his shoulders. Blackness equaled bondage in this benighted region. He admired the strength and courage and fortitude and incredible patience of his black brothers and sisters, people like Miz Lucretia Borgia of Falconhurst. He envied them, but he could never belong among them. He was as good as any man, and he would prove it; he would live like it and, if he had to, die like it.

In the small town of River Wharf, Tommy pulled the carriage into the curb outside a hat shop and tied the horse at

the cast-iron hitching post. Anne-Jeanne squeezed his hand. "I'll just be a few minutes in the milliner's, Tommy. Why don't you look around the town? It won't take you ten minutes to see it all, but I'll meet you back here as soon as I can."

River Wharf was a damp, mildewed, and humid little settlement which existed because of the ferry that transported travelers across the river. A few boats docked at the sagging wharf with supplies, goods, and an occasional passenger. Perhaps the houses along the rutted, shell-paved street had once been painted, but the dampness and humidity overwhelmed the structures and the people who lived in them. This was a tired town, where old men slumped under water oaks, too fatigued to move checkers on a board.

Tommy lighted a cigar and strolled along the boardwalk. Ahead he saw a scabby looking man suddenly leap from a doorway and run into an alley. There was something familiar about the figure. Grinning, Tommy remembered. It was Simon Greene, the thug who had attacked Anne-Jeanne on the highway. Tommy felt a faint flaring of panic and then dismissed it. He had nothing to fear from Simon Greene. The knave might try to backshoot him, but he doubted if the man's aim was any better than his courage. He shook the fellow from his mind, pausing to glance at the flyers on the bulletin board outside the town hotel.

His jaw tightened, his teeth clamping on his cigar. One flyer seemed to lunge outward from that board, grabbing at his gaze, holding it. He felt a shudder wrack his body. He read the flyer, then reread it:

WANTED:

$5000 REWARD

PAYMENT IN GOLD

FOR CAPTURE AND RETURN OF RUNAWAY SLAVE

CALICO

A/KA TOMMY VERDER

Wanted for RAPE OF WHITE WOMAN, MURDER, UNLAWFUL FLIGHT

Light-colored, high-yellow Negro, passes for white.

Six-foot tall. 23 Years old. Male stud animal

with six fingers on left hand.

Contact MR. HAMMOND MAXWELL

of FALCONHURST PLANTATION

Benson, Alabama.

Tommy hurled his cigar into the street. He shoved his left hand into his jacket pocket and looked around guiltily. He forced himself to walk slowly and casually back to the buggy. He swung up into it. He kept his left hand in his pocket and tilted the brim of his hat lower over his face.

Tommy slouched upon the boot of the carriage, staring into the middle distance. He felt sick. He'd known this paradise couldn't last. The gods had given him a look at heaven before they plunged him back into hell. What did it matter that Anne-Jeanne Casale loved him and wanted him with her? What was it they said about love? The devil must have invented love because god warned in Eden against it.

He had to get away, and soon. Nobody had yet connected the six-fingered fugitive with the young Meadow Leas houseguest. But how long before the name Tommy Verder leaped out from that wanted flyer and exposed him to one of those white men who had smiled so cordially, welcoming him?

It never ended, his headlong, futile race against death. Capture and a hang rope lurked, waiting around every corner, every bend in the road. This Wanted Poster showed that Ham Maxwell still trailed him, obsessed and sick with hatred, and that Ham would go on hounding him to death. This flyer also

proved that either Ham himself, or his hired agents, armed with guns and warrants, had been in River Wharf, might still be here. . . .

Sweating, Tommy searched the street from beneath his tilted hat brim. He found a new and sinister reason for Simon Greene's precipitous flight at the sight of him. Did Simon Greene remember the six-fingered hand beating him and, full of hatred and lust for vengeance, had he promised to report the moment the fugitive from Falconhurst was spied?

Each moment awaiting Anne-Jeanne stretched into a sweated eternity. When he saw her emerging from the millinery shop, he leaped down from the buggy and crossed the boardwalk to her. With what he hoped looked like gallantry instead of haste, he took the hatboxes and tried to hurry her, without appearing hurried or spooked by panic.

He said very little on the drive back to Meadow Leas. Anne-Jeanne was happy and content, elated with everything in her new life, and she chatted easily, hardly aware of his rigid silence. He could not shake the sense of some terrible omen of evil. It was as if someone had left the door of death slightly ajar, and he felt its chill breath.

A guest awaited them at Meadow Leas.

Tommy went tense at the sight of the youthful white man standing on the columned veranda of the mansion. All he could think was that his pursuers would not even allow him to leave; they would have to expose him and humiliate him and destroy him in Anne-Jeanne's eyes. He was sorry about that. Whatever he wanted, he did not want Anne-Jeanne hurt. She'd done nothing to deserve the agony of being told she'd taken a fugitive black into her home and her bed and her heart.

"Oh, my God," he heard Anne-Jeanne's impatient whisper. "It's my cousin Paul. Paul Lavedon. Second or third cousin, I think. Once removed."

Tommy scowled, troubled about her reputation within her family. "What will he think of my staying here like this, with you, unchaperoned?" He tried to keep his tone casual.

Anne-Jeanne stared at him, eyes wide. "I don't care what he thinks. He doesn't pay my taxes. Besides, he's an impossi-

ble little snob. Such a bore." She exhaled. "But touchingly devoted to me."

Tommy smiled. "I'm sure he is."

Young Lavedon came to the brink of the shade of the veranda and watched as Tommy assisted Anne-Jeanne from the buggy. Two servant boys led the horse and vehicle away in the golden sunlight. Lavedon waited until Anne-Jeanne was on the top step before he reached out, laughing, and caught her in his arms. He swung her around.

"Oh, Cousin Anne-Jeanne, How I've looked forward to seeing you. How I have waited for this visit. You're looking so lovely. More beautiful than ever."

Anne-Jeanne extricated herself from her cousin's embrace. "Perhaps that's because I'm happier than I've ever been, Paul."

"Oh?" He frowned slightly. "Happier than you've ever been? With dear Cousin Manfred-Tom in his grave?"

Anne-Jeanne ignored this. She walked past Paul to a cluster of cane furniture around a glass-topped table set upon a circular carpet. Servants toted her hatboxes into the house. Anne-Jeanne took off her hat and laid it, with her closed parasol, on the table. "What brings you to Meadow Leas, Paul?"

"You, Cousin Anne-Jeanne. Always you. I've loved you most devotedly since I was a little boy."

Anne-Jeanne laughed at him. "Come now, Paul, you've never in your life loved anyone but yourself, and you know it as well as you know your name. Who could ever replace your mirror in your affections?"

Lavedon laughed and shrugged. "Well, we're a beautiful family, Anne-Jeanne. We just have to live with that."

To this moment Lavedon had ignored Tommy totally, not even bothering to glance toward him. Tommy looked young Lavedon over in distaste. Without knowing the youth personally, he knew him well—his type, his kind, his species. Paul Lavedon was the epitome of his class, the young Southron plantation gentleman. A man of chivalry and honor and breeding.

Tommy's lips twisted faintly sourly. Lavedon's idea of chivalry was showy courtesy and gallantry toward the ladies of his own caste, and ill-mannered disdain for all other fe-

males. Honor was something he boasted of in the company of his peers, and which he demanded in every other man who dealt with him, but as for himself, he gambled, often beyond his limits, and on chits he could never redeem; he welched on his debts, too genteel to present his person to his creditors. His idea of breeding was in the lineage of his horses, if anywhere. Tommy had seen Lavedon's kind all his life, and especially while he mastered his stable of girls and during his sojourn on the Showboat. Men, exact duplicates of Lavedon, had crowded around the show girls—soubrettes and ingenues—vulgar, vain, and arrogant.

Lavedon and his brothers dressed fashionably and foppishly. They always looked newly polished, pink-cheeked, and urbane. They were insolent, haughty, overbearing, and domineering. He proclaimed his breeding by displaying his total lack of it among his inferiors. The world belonged to Lavedon and his peers. He was responsible to no one beneath him—not servant, tradesman, tailor, or gambler.

Lavedon barely acknowledged Anne-Jeanne's introduction of Tommy Verder. Paul touched Tommy's hand gingerly and dropped it at once. "Verder?" Paul frowned. "Haven't I heard that name somewhere?"

"Of course you have, Paul," Anne-Jeanne said. "Tommy's family is one of the finest of Alabama."

"Oh?" Paul's tone indicated that he doubted this, and he glanced at Tommy along his nose. "Do you know these people—these Verders—well, Cousin Anne-Jeanne? Or do you accept Mr. Verder's unsubstantiated word on who he is and what he is?"

Anne-Jeanne gasped, rage glittering in her gentle eyes. "Paul! There's no excuse for your shameless behavior. Mr. Verder is my guest."

Paul gave them both an insolent smile. "I'll try to remember that, Cousin Anne-Jeanne. As long as Mr. Verder is here with us."

Anne-jeanne straightened, her cheeks pallid. "Mr. Verder will be here indefinitely, Paul. I told you. He is my houseguest."

Paul drew a silk kerchief from his cuff and dabbed it negligently across his upper lip. "How nice," he said. "But

you will forgive me, Cousin Anne-Jeanne, if I withhold my approval until Mr. Verder and I have exchanged references."

Anne-Jeanne seemed about to say a dozen heated things, but she bit her lip and when she spoke, her voice was controlled, if crackling with outrage. "Paul, you're insulting. You insult my guest. You insult me. You're my relative, and so welcome in my home, but only so long as you conduct yourself with proper regard and respect for my friends."

Paul waved his hand disparagingly. "If Mr. Verder is an honorable gentleman, a man of honor with nothing to hide, he has nothing to fear from me. And I am sure he'll understand and accept my caution. I wouldn't ask him to accept me at face value. I am sure he expects no more of me. After all, I have only your own best interests at heart, Cousin Anne-Jeanne. Surely, no one can fault me for wishing to protect my own dearest cousin."

"Protect me? From what?" Anne-Jeanne's voice crackled.

Paul shrugged. "From opportunists, dearest cousin. Adventurers. A helpless and gullible widow."

"Damn you, Paul. I demand that you apologize this instant," Anne-Jeanne said.

"It's not important,' Tommy said. He gazed at Lavedon, brow tilted. "I shall be leaving Meadow Leas tomorrow."

Anne-Jeanne cried out, her eyes brimming with tears of shock, disappointment, and rage. "Paul, I'll never forgive you this. You've insulted my guest. If you have driven him away with your insolence, I'm through with you. I'll never speak to you again."

Paul smiled thinly and condescendingly. "If I am in error, you shall have my most abject apology, Cousin Anne-Jeanne." He sat down in a wicker wing chair and peered up at them indolently. Looking at Lavedon, Tommy thought, popinjay, strutting cock, arrogant banty. Lavedon's saving grace, if he had one, was that he truly did not suspect that he was not the core of the universe about which everything else revolved. And he believed everyone admired him: his male beauty, his chivalry, and his elegance. And he felt everyone was as fascinated with his wondrous self as he was.

Once Lavedon had staked out his territorial rights, displayed his family precedence at Meadow Leas, he turned his charm upon his cousin, doing what he did best, talking about

himself. In a way, he was more overwhelming than overbearing. The great good news about himself poured across his lips, full of enthusiasm and shared pleasure at his triumphs.

"The entire family sends their love, Cousin Anne-Jeanne. Why, if I gave you a kiss for each dear member who urged me so to greet you for them, we'd kiss late into the night."

Anne-Jeanne sighed, still taut and unhappy. She was as yet unable to deal with the shocking news that Tommy might be leaving Meadow Leas. How would she live without him? What would she do without him? The days stretched ahead—humid, empty, and eternal without him. "I accept their greetings, Paul. You needn't worry about kissing me."

"Why, I love to kiss you, Cousin Anne-Jeanne. You're one of the loveliest women in the Lavedon clan. My brothers—all three of them—send you their undying devotion. My father wishes to be remembered most warmly. And Grandfather Gallaudett declares that the happiest moments of his life were spent under your roof. And, of course, you know I am always happier here near you than anywhere else on earth."

"How nice," Anne-Jeanne said.

Paul smiled, nodding, filled with his own self-intoxication. "No matter how pleasant it is here at Meadow Leas, I can stay only a few days, a few weeks at the most. I am burning now with a new ambition, Cousin Anne-Jeanne! I am going to read for the law. Grandfather Gallaudett—a state supreme court justice—has written letters to two old law associates, introducing and recommending me. One firm is in New Orleans. The other in Charleston, South Carolina. I shall go first to New Orleans. If the attorneys, at the most prestigious firm down there—Cox, Fox, Wakefield and Todd—if they make it worth my while to join them, I shall. They are my first choice. New Orleans has the advantage of being near home—and near to you, Cousin Anne-Jeanne. I could spend every weekend up here with you."

"I would want you to make that choice most likely to advance your career, Cousin Paul, no matter where it was," Anne-Jeanne said.

Lavedon nodded enthusiastically. "Of course you would, dear Cousin! How like you. Wishing the best always for others. If I am not welcomed warmly—and profitably, you know—at Cox, Fox, Wakefield and Todd, I shall travel east

to the firm of Trevor Feaster in Charleston. All these attorneys are close personal friends of Grandfather's, and all deeply indebted to him. He assures me they will do all they can to speed my success and quick acceptance at the bar."

"It looks like you'd be too excited about your new career to delay, even for a day," Anne-Jeanne suggested, not entirely warmly.

Paul sat forward in the wing chair. "Oh, Cousin Anne-Jeanne, I have hurt your feelings, haven't I?"

"To the quick, Paul. I won't lie to you about that."

He laughed and stood up. He caressed her shoulder lightly. "I've offended my dearest cousin. And all because I am trying to protect your own best interests. A woman. A widow. Alone in the world. Unsophisticated. Gullible. A most alluring target for all manner of adventurers."

Anne-Jeanne drew a deep breath, held it. "I owe you nothing, Cousin Paul. No explanation. But I will tell you this. My husband is dead. He is buried up there. But I am alive. I am not buried with him. I have not retired from life. I can take care of myself."

"All women believe that," Paul said in his most patronizing tone.

"Mr. Verder was traveling to New Orleans, already wounded when a ruffian attacked him earlier. He came upon my coach—waylaid by a felon—a criminal who meant to rape and rob—perhaps even to kill me. And he might have. My slaves were terrified, standing helpless, crying, impotent against the scoundrel. But for Mr. Verder, I might be a corpse beside a lonely road. I owe him my life. And I won't permit you to insult him in my home."

Paul grinned superciliously, far from convinced. "Well, well. How heroic. And a perfect entry—wouldn't you say?—into your home and into your confidence?"

Anne-Jeanne's face was ashen, her lips a thin line. "One more word, Paul. One more, and I shall ask you to leave."

The rest of that day at Meadow Leas was spent in all the cordiality of an armed camp. Tension crackled in the atmosphere, though Lavedon was careful what he said, and though Anne-Jeanne appeared outwardly at ease. Paul continued to stalk his cousin, regaling her with stories of his exploits in the

most rarified heights of polite Southron society, his partygoing, the mutual friends who had vied for the delight of loving and pampering him and making him welcome for weeks at a time in their homes, from Mobile to Richmond.

Tommy was not unaware of the way Lavedon covertly studied him. Something flickered and flared, and almost ignited, in Lavedon's mind. Verder. Lavedon had heard the name somewhere. On a Wanted Poster?

Regretfully Tommy made up his mind to depart the plantation in the morning. It was over here, the pleasure and passion and security. If he stayed he only endangered Anne-Jeanne, and he did not want to hurt her. He felt he would triumph if he could get away from Meadow Leas without Anne-Jeanne's learning any of the damaging truth about him. He didn't give a damn what Lavedon might do. It was time to run again.

He wandered the house and lawns as if caged. He regretted that he would not likely be alone again with Anne-Jeanne, or permitted the opportunity to take her into his arms and into bed. He devoutly wished, on their last day together, that he could love her passionately, tenderly, vehemently. He wanted to set astir in her ardent and fiery responses; he wanted it to be a night she could remember glowingly when he was gone. He wanted to prove to her that he had cared, and cared deeply for her, in this brief sanctuary. But he was certain the garrulous Lavedon would not allow them a moment alone. He was convinced that Anne-Jeanne's suspicious cousin would watch them covertly from the shadows.

He felt Anne-Jeanne's loving gaze following him. From her face, he read her whetted appetites, her frustrated desires. She wanted to touch him. She wanted to lie in his arms. She was sick with longing.

Astonishingly, Lavedon excused himself after dinner. It had been a long and tiring trip on horseback, with only his body servant to tend him. He was exhausted. Usually it would revive him and rekindle his sagging spirits to listen to Cousin Anne-Jeanne's singing in the lamp-lit parlor, but tonight he was afraid he would fall asleep. He was sure they would feel better in the morning. He did not bother saying good night to Tommy.

Tommy grinned, relieved and pleased simply to have

Lavedon leave the room. He lighted the place up by departing. Like figures in some tableau, he and Anne-Jeanne remained unmoving until Paul had disappeared up the wide staircase, his manservant carrying a lamp in his wake, the yellow glow bumping ahead of them, picking at the darkness. Tommy and Anne-Jeanne gazed at each other, smiling like children freed from hated restrictions.

Anne-Jeanne came into his arms with an impassioned rush. She closed her arms tightly about him and kissed him fervently. "Oh, you mustn't go," she whispered. "You musn't ever leave me."

"We won't talk about it now. We have tonight."

"I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you."

He kissed her gently. "I'll only go to New Orleans. Perhaps I can come back. We'll be together. He can't keep us apart."

"I hate him. I hate anyone who comes between us." She looked about in anguish. "I want you to love me. Now. Here."

He laughed at her. "We can be smarter than that. Give Lavedon a chance to go to sleep. Sing at least a couple of songs before you go up to bed."

She sighed deeply. "Yes. I suppose I better. He's such a little sneak. He always has been."

He stood at the tall windows while she sang. He could feel her eyes on his back. She got up at last and said good night. He stood at the foot of the wide staircase and watched her go up to the cavernous second floor accompanied by her two maids.

He walked out on the terrace and smoked a cigar after Anne-Jeanne had gone upstairs. He felt a hurting sense of loss, knowing he would never see this place again. The countryside was serene, shrouded in early evening purple darkness and studded with a wan freckling of stars. It was a refuge of peace. But the fact was he didn't belong here. He belonged nowhere, but here at Meadow Leas least of all. A falling star blazed across the face of the night sky. Watching it burn out, Tommy was shaken by a deep and infinite sadness.

The estate settled into silent serenity, the cabins of the

slaves were dark cubes against the serrated horizon. No sounds rose from barns or corrals. A profound sense of calm pervaded the night, and yet Tommy felt tense, edgy, alert to danger, though there seemed only infinite tranquility in the jasmine-scented darkness.

He said good night to the three servants who stood yawning, waiting to secure the mansion for the night. He climbed the steps and went along the lamp-lit upper corridor and into his bedroom. A bed lamp glowed invitingly. His bed sheets were turned back, awaiting him. Then he saw Anne-Jeanne, like a golden statue in a shimmering, almost translucent nightgown. Her hair loose about her shoulders, she stood in shadows near the doors that connected their bedrooms.

He smiled, whispering. "Do you think this is wise?"

She came to him, her eyes brimmed with tears. "I don't want to be wise, Tommy. I want to be in your arms. . . . Oh, Tommy, what will you do in New Orleans?"

"I'll be all right." He had no idea what he would do. Perhaps, if everything else failed, he'd be forced into his old profession. New Orleans had more prostitutes than all other American cities combined, and had had since Old Andy Jackson insisted on paying off his troops in gold specie after the War of 1812. Andy and his Kentucky soldiers were long gone, but the whores who had flocked into the Crescent City had multiplied like blackberries in fallow fields.

"Write to me. If you need anything, let me know."

He kissed her gently. "I will. You know I will."

She sobbed suddenly. "Oh, Tommy, dearest Tommy." She threw her arms around him. "I can't let you go. I can't ever let you go."

"It's better this way," he whispered, caressing her. "When I'm settled in New Orleans, you can come and see me."

He was lying, trying to ease the hurt of parting for her, but he had the instinctive sense that Anne-Jeanne knew he lied. If he left Meadow Leas, he would never come back to her, she would never see him again. Sobbing, she clung to him and slid to her knees, her face pressed against him. It was not that he would not want to see her, he would, but he had lived in this nightmare so long he could see ahead to the hurt for Anne-Jeanne when she learned the truth that he was a black

fugitive. She would not want to come to him. They had this moment, and only this night.

He knelt beside her and took her up gently in his arms. He carried her to the bed and laid her down across it. Somehow she slithered out of her gown and lay naked, waiting for him. "Get out of those clothes," she pleaded. "Oh, Tommy, darling, hurry."

He worked swiftly and expertly. Undressing speedily in situations like this was a second nature to him by now. He thrust off his boots, unbuttoned his shirt and tossed it behind him. Then he blew out the lamp. She whimpered in protest. "Our last night, Tommy?"

"It's not our last night," he lied in the darkness. He removed the rest of his clothing expertly and smoothly, lying down on the bed beside her. "It's only the last night—for a little while. . . . We'll make it a night to remember."

"Oh, Tommy, darling, we will, won't we? Even better than all our other nights? Oh, God, Tommy, I remember every one of them, everything about every one of them."

Anne-Jeanne's hands strayed to his body and he caressed her. Their loving each other this night had a bitter sweetness they'd never experienced before. Their agonized parting gave a deeper meaning to all their passions.

It was a night for the epodes. It did not matter where destiny drove him, he would never forget this heated, rapturous night, and he was sure that it would reinforce Anne-Jeanne's memories through many cold evenings alone. He was damned proud of his prowess with women—it was the art he'd learned best and most perfected—but no other night in his memory matched this one. He would not have been surprised had the dogs howled in the yard, or the stallions bolted, slavering in their stalls.

Though Anne-Jeanne writhed, her hips working in a frenzy of anticipation, he would not hurry. "We've got the whole night, dearest Anne-Jeanne," he whispered against her fevered cheek. She only rolled her head back and forth, distracted with desire.

Slowly and ardently, with caressing, quickening fingers and lips, he covered her body, he explored her and aroused her until she was trembling, her blood boiling in her veins. He buried his face in the fragant tangle of her hair about her

throat and across her full, taut breasts. At last, when she was in a frenzy, he drew her to him, and all the excitement and passions of his body became concentrated in his driving force.

Anne-Jeanne bit the soft cord of his inner shoulder to keep from screaming out. Her fingers dug into his back as she pulled him to her, her hips flailing in mindless violence.

"Oh, my dearest Tommy," she gasped. "Oh, you won't leave me, will you?" Her voice rose to a wail, muffled by his flesh. "You will stay, won't you? Oh, you will! I know you will stay with me."

The hours and the darkness spun past as if they were encased in a safe and wondrous cocoon, spinning out of time and space, transported in ecstasy to a galaxy of their own.

Spent, Tommy fell away from her clutching embrace again and again. She allowed him to rest for a few moments—once he fell into helpless sleep—but soon her hands were closing on him again: massaging, caressing, demanding.

The room lightened faintly as they embraced, the first prying pink fingers of daylight pawing at the edges of the drapes. All Anne-Jeanne could think was that she did not care what time it was, or what day it was, she wanted only to stay in this passionate, soul-stirring delirium. It was agonizingly pleasurable, more than the flesh could bear, and yet she never wanted it to end.

In her torment and ecstasy she did not hear the creak of the corridor door hinges. Paul Lavedon stood over them at the side of the bed before she was aware of anything but the rapture of Tommy's embrace.

She whimpered and then screamed. "What are you doing here?"

Raging, derisive laughter mocked her. She was aware that Tommy fell away from her, and for a painful instant of withdrawal she could think only that she would die of emptiness and loss and frustration. Involuntarily her hands clutched at him.

"Now, isn't this a lovely sight, Cousin Anne-Jeanne? So this is the way you entertain your *houseguest*?"

"Get out," Anne-Jeanne wailed. She lay naked and exposed when Tommy fell away from her, but she was too overcome with outrage to care about her nakedness.

"I think you are slightly confused, dear Cousin," Paul said. "This cad is the one who must leave, this scoundrel taking advantage of a helpless widow."

Her head rolled back and forth on her pillow. "Damn you. No one is taking advantage—unless it be me. This is what I want."

Lavedon shook his head slowly from side to side, his mouth twisted with contempt. "Oh, I'm sure you believe it is what you want. But I am a man of the world. I know about scoundrels like this one. I know that he has worked his way into your confidence. God help us, your reputation and your chastity may be the least of your possessions he will steal."

Now forgetting her state of undress, Anne-Jeanne lunged up on the rumpled bed. She pointed imperiously toward the door. "Get out, Paul. Out of this room, and out of this house."

"I'm sorry, Cousin. I am the man of this house just now. Your own dear blood relation. Your welfare is my concern. I happen to know this man is just a common adventurer, a reprobate preying on lonely women."

"I invited him here, you blind fool."

"Of course you did. You didn't see how he maneuvered you—"

"He saved my life. Saved me from a rapist. I owed him. I asked him here. I *begged* him to stay. . . . As, damn your insolent soul, I begged him to go to bed with me."

Paul only shook his head in disdain. "This blackguard has really turned your head, hasn't he? My dearest Cousin, has it ever occurred to you that the so-called rapist who attacted you might simply have been an accomplice of this sneak?"

"Oh, what a fool you are," she cried.

"Am I? Well, dear Cousin, I came up here early last night for a reason. I went through this man's belongings—his meager belongings. He has a few dollars in cash. No identification cards or papers of any kind. No letters of introduction, or reference."

"You had no right to steal into this room," she said, incredulous.

Paul grinned coolly. "I had every right. My concern for you gave me the right. One day, you'll thank God that I did

this. My intentions were honorable, your safety my goal. I don't apologize."

She spoke in terrible irony. "I thank you for whatever you have done in my behalf. And now I will thank you to get out of here and out of my house. If you don't leave, I shall have the servants remove you from the premises."

Thanking the gods that his belly and back were swathed in gauze bandages to protect the bullet wound in his side, Tommy swung out of bed. He heard Lavedon's gasp and outcry of repugnance when the light struck his torso and his groin.

"My God in heaven," Lavedon cried out. "Look at the way this bastard's hung. He's built like a mule or a nigger! I never saw anything like that on a human being. No wonder you begged him into your bed, once he weasled his way into your good graces. No, dear Cousin. I am more adamant than ever. If you won't protect yourself, it becomes my chivalrous duty to protect you—from this adventurer and from yourself."

She raged with angered laughter. "Even against my will?"

"For your own good, my dearest Cousin."

"Why don't I just leave?" Tommy said.

Anne-Jeanne cried out. "I won't let you go."

"No, blackguard, you won't escape me that easily, either," Lavedon said. "You have overstayed. You have demeaned and disgraced a lady of my family. You have insulted her and me and our family. And this is intolerable. I cannot endure such an insult." He lashed out with the back of his hand, striking Tommy across the face. "I challenge you to a duel, sir. For only a duel, and your blood, can erase the ugly stain of infamy from my family."

A strange silence enveloped the room, the house, the estate. Anne-Jeanne sat unmoving, stunned, on the bed.

Tommy stared at the young challenger. He wanted to laugh at him, but it had gone beyond laughter. Even if he left now, which was the wisest and most reasonable option, Lavedon would not let him go in peace. Lavedon wanted his pound of flesh, his pint of blood, his revenge. But it was as useless to stay and fight as it was to run from the duel.

He shrugged. He could fight Lavedon, but he could not win. Even if his bullet struck the young aristocrat, he was finished here. Wounding or killing Lavedon would solve nothing for him and Anne-Jeanne Casale.

He could refuse to fight, but this would not end the matter between him and Lavedon. His refusing to duel would simply underscore Lavedon's thesis: that Verder was an adventurer, a man without honor. He did not care what Lavedon thought of him, but suddenly he found he did care what Anne-Jeanne believed of him, even if he never saw her again.

He drew a deep breath. He had one final option. He could agree to duel with Lavedon, and simply run. But suddenly the thought of running from an arrogant, overweening popinjay like Paul Lavedon made him sick at his stomach.

Still, dueling Lavedon seemed so pointless. His idyll here with Anne-Jeanne was all over anyway, no matter the outcome of any duel. There was that Wanted Poster, it was only a matter of time until the law came for him here. There was Paul Lavedon's family. Lavedon could kill him in a duel and get away with it, even be hailed as an honorable and chivalrous knight of the Old South. But this was not true for Tommy Verder. He would have to flee from a duel as from a murder. He was not a gentleman, he was a fugitive, a rogue black. And the gods' truth was that though he stood naked in a blood-pink bedroom, he was already running again—in a nightmare world.

"I am at your disposal, Lavedon," he said. "I choose pistols—the time and place a matter of your own convenience."

A giant water oak, at least one hundred years old, grew in the center of its own leaf-carpeted clearing overlooking the sunstruck river. No weeds or flowers grew under the far-spreading canopy of the oak. The sand around it lay fallow, shielded from the sun to the edge of the embankment. This secret place Lavedon had chosen as site for their duel was forbiddingly, oppressively silent. No birds nested in the naked limbs, no animals approached from the underbrush bearding the shadowed park.

They rode their horses, at considerable distance from each other, across the planted fields and hammocks of Casale property. At last, under the great tree overlooking the wide river, Lavedon swung down. He ground-tied his mount and motioned for Verder to dismount.

The bravado that had flushed Lavedon's face and squared his shoulders had ebbed. He was ashen, his cheeks rigid, his

mouth a thin, taut line. He was nervous, but Tommy granted that he was determined. Tommy himself had no stomach for a duel: another name for murder. He had long learned a truth about honorable men. Most duelists who challenged others to fights were cold marksmen; they did not gamble with their lives. When they pressed the trigger of their dueling pieces they committed murder as surely as any thug in a back alley. He saw that because he had accepted Lavedon's challenge, the young aristocrat was no longer suffused with self-confidence.

Lavedon's hands shook as he placed the velvet-covered case on the ground and opened it. Tommy found himself admiring the polished beauty and craftsmanship of the dueling guns. Clearly they were a fine example of the gunsmith's art, looking to be perfectly balanced, with gleaming brass mountings and beautifully shaped and finished half-stocks. The fifteen-inch weapon, with ten-inch octagonal barrel, front and rear sights, loaded a round lead ball with a light powder charge. It was deadly at twenty-five paces.

Tommy's voice mocked Lavedon. "It's still not too late to call this off, Lavedon. You don't have to die for your honor."

Lavedon's voice shook. "I shall not die, blackguard. Choose your weapon."

"I'm leaving anyway. You can go back home and tell them anything you want to. You can spend the rest of your life bragging about how you despatched a villain in a duel."

Lavedon took a gun and stood up, hefting it in both hands. "My family honor has been damaged. Only blood will wash away the stain. I don't expect a ruffian like you to understand that."

"Oh, for God's sake, Lavedon," Tommy said. "There's no need for this."

"Choose your weapon, you night-prowling bastard."

Shrugging, Tommy took up the gun. They loaded the dueling pieces while Lavedon laid out the ground rules. They would stand back-to-back. They would advance five paces, each counting aloud so the other could hear, then they would turn and fire.

They stood back-to-back, dueling guns at their sides. "Start to count," Lavedon said, voice loud and empty in the silence.

Tommy took a giant step. The longer his strides, the more distance he put between them, the less accurate the weaponry.

Tommy called out, counting as he paced. Suddenly, as he shouted out the third time, some instinct warned him. Behind him, Lavedon was no longer counting.

Instinctively he flung himself aside, fading hard to the left because a right-handed man's fire carried to the right. As he turned, Tommy angled his body sideways to present the slimmest target.

Rage gorged up through him and he jerked up his gun to fire. Lavedon had heeled around, sunk to his knee, and was aiming his gun with both hands steadying it. Panic and cunning flushed his face. This secret duel had been his plan all along. He never meant to fight fair; he had meant to dispose of his opponent.

As Tommy turned, alert, Lavedon cried out in shock. He jerked the gun back, trying to true his aim, and pressed its trigger. The weapon lurched in his grip. The explosion was sharp, its brief flame quickly dissipated. Tommy felt the bullet whistle past his cheek like the grazing slash of some random wasp.

He fired in that same instant, the reports of the guns in quick succession. There was one difference. He did not miss. His bullet struck Lavedon full in the face, between the eyes. Lavedon went toppling backward, his gun flung from his inert fingers. He was dead when he struck the leaf-piled ground.

Sick with grief and hatred, Tommy gripped the gun in his fist and then threw it as far as he could from him. He heard it strike in the water, but he did not glance toward it. He did not move his gaze from Lavedon's silenced body.

Slowly he trudged across the leaves to where the youth lay sprawled in death. He stared down at him. "You poor, stupid son of a bitch," he said.

He did not know how long he stood there. He did know that the sound of their guns carried in the sylvan silences, but he also knew it did not matter. Lavedon had chosen the site for his treachery well. They were at the farthest reach of the Casale estate.

Gradually the rage and sickness subsided and reason returned. He had that nightmarish certainty that he might as well lie dead beside Lavedon. He had killed a white man, a hanging offense for any Negro in Louisiana. The word *duel* no longer had any relevance. There were no witnesses to see

that it was self-defense. Paul Lavedon had planned there would be no witnesses when he backshot Tommy Verder. And anyhow, self-defense had no legal validity for a black who killed a white man.

He felt that terrible, enfeebling sense of fatigue and helplessness. He could not go back to Anne-Jeanne, even to tell her what had happened. It would be only a matter of time until Lavedon's family inquired into the youth's whereabouts. Inquiry and investigation would certainly reveal what had happened. Their digging into Tommy Verder's piebald past would certainly prove that he was not the man he had represented himself to Anne-Jeanne, but was a rogue black fugitive from Falconhurst.

As the debilitating agony ebbed, his drive for survival took over. Suppose they didn't find Lavedon's body? He weighted it down with fieldstones. He went through the clothing, removing all identification markings, tailor codes, everything. From Lavedon's inner pockets he took the proud letters of recommendation and reference, crushing them in his fist.

He found even less cash in Lavedon's pockets and wallet than he carried on his own person. Maybe there was less difference between them than Lavedon had pretended. Lavedon needed to stay at Meadow Leas without interference from an outsider, because he needed Anne-Jeanne's financial support until he could set himself up in New Orleans.

Tommy grinned coldly down at the dead man. "Well, you were a son of a bitch, Lavedon, but if it makes you feel any better, you were right about me."

He placed his own meager identification on Lavedon. Then he dragged the weighted body to the edge of the embankment and thrust it outward as far as he could. The stone-ladened body splashed loudly and sank quickly.

Tommy stood unmoving, watching the widening rings upon the surface of the water, remembering the theory which stated that once started in motion, ripples spread outward and expanded forever, never again ceasing, and never still.

Part One

LAVEDON

I

The world teetered suddenly and so did Verder.

Masked men rushed him, suddenly and silently, from the blackness of a Vieux Carre alleyway. Two of them pounced upon him without warning, like savage cats, battering him with their fists, knees, and thick, hobnailed boots before he could set himself or cry out.

Cry out for what, for hell's sake? Yell for help in this place? It would not have helped to shout, but this didn't matter. There wasn't time to force a sound through his tight throat, even if he could have done it.

His heart banged fiercely in his rib cage, fear and rage at war in his insides. There was nothing world-shaking about thugs preying on victims after dark in the New Orleans French Quarter in this year of 1825. God knew assault had become a way of life down here. But what did they expect to get from him, a twenty-dollar-a-week law clerk?

There wasn't time to think, only for resolving to go down fighting. Whatever these cutthroats took from him tonight, they'd damn well earn.

He reacted instinctively. The two thugs closed in from each side. He lunged forward, trying to fight his way past them, at the same instant setting himself to run. But a third man, one he hadn't seen yet, struck him low in the small of his back. He staggered, and before he could straighten they had him.

Fists caught him on both sides of his head. He was rocked one way and then the other under the force of their blows. A man behind him caught him around the throat and yanked him backward. The others grabbed his arms, twisting and pinning

them against his ribs. He tried doggedly to break free, to turn, to loosen that deadly hammerlock on his windpipe. Everything in the night street wheeled and skidded insanely, and he stumbled to his knees on the banquette, the cobbles ripping at his flesh.

They were expert assailants, grasping his arms as if trying to tear his limbs from his shoulder sockets. At the same time they struck him in the face with their free fists. His mouth tore and his nose bled. That lock on his throat relaxed just enough so that he could gasp, sucking air into his oxygen-starved lungs.

They slammed him against the rough plastered wall. Decorative filler shells chewed at his back through his jacket. They continued hitting him in the face and he sagged, bleeding. His blood tasted hot, salty, and unpalatable.

The third man ran around in front of him. For a delayed beat he stood silently, panting loudly in a way that had nothing to do with fatigue, staring at Tommy.

Their silk masks with slanted eye slits completely concealed their faces. Color, creed, or condition of servitude didn't seem urgent, but Tommy saw that the two men holding him were black. Their hamlike fists betrayed their race. The man crouched in front of Tommy was dark-skinned but white, likely Creole.

Tommy sagged against the rough wall, letting the two blacks half-support him. His brain was short-circuiting. Nightmare scenes of insanity alternated with flashes of reality: the dark empty alleyway, pedestrians hurrying past, faces averted, a few feet away, the masked faces of unknown men bent on maiming him at least.

Sobbing for breath he waited, puzzled. If they were muggers, why didn't they rob him and run? His addled senses tried to deal with this. What did they want from him? What were they after? In a flash, he remembered that Falconhurst Wanted Poster; he saw Paul Lavedon's dead face, hired gunmen, bounty hunters, lawmen, a world populated with his mortal enemies.

The masked Creole stepped closer, clutching Tommy's shirtfront in his fist and twisting it. The fellow still panted with that suppressed fury, and he sucked in a deep breath, trying to control his voice.

"Listen to me, M'sieu Lavedon. And listen well—"

So, whoever they were, they were enemies of Paul Lavedon's, and not from his own hordes of hunters and haters.

Tommy let him get no further. The blacks on each side had relaxed just slightly, allowing their Creole master to take charge. As that silk-encased head came closer, Tommy brought his knee upward, driving it into the man's crotch with all his fury and pain and outrage behind it.

The Creole doubled forward—retching, belching, and gasping.

Shock and surprise bought Tommy one instant in eternity and he seized at it. Stunned by the abrupt attack on their master, the Negroes relaxed their grips and Lavedon jerked free. He brought his fist full into the masked face in front of him, and pirouetted away from the blacks in that same fluid motion.

The black on Tommy's left recovered first. He leaped toward Tommy, arms extended. Without even waiting to turn, Tommy whipped his arm around, fingers extended, catching the black across his Adam's apple.

The Negro straightened tall on his toes and turned all the way around, as if his only chance to breathe again on this earth somehow lay behind him. He struck against the rough facing of the wall, clawing at it with both fists.

Tommy didn't bother glancing at him. He heeled around, setting himself to ward off the third attacker, but the fight was gone out of this felon. He stared, wide-eyed, through those slits for one long beat toward Tommy, then moved his gaze to the Creole, who was crouched, massaging his groin and vomiting into his own silk mask. The troubled black watched his partner clawing at that wall and trying to breathe. His appetite for violence failed him. He shook his head once, then whirled and fled into the odorous shadows of the alley.

Tommy hesitated the space of one long breath. It flashed through his mind that he could rip off that Creole's mask, find out who his assailant was and what the hell he wanted. His instincts warned him it was time to get out of here. He brought the side of his hand in a downward chop across the nape of the Creole's neck. He watched the man plunge facefirst onto the cobbles. Then he walked away.

II

Tommy kept walking. He didn't walk steadily; he staggered and reeled. He wavered as if drunk, but he plodded forward in a reasonably straight course.

This wasn't easy, because the backs of his legs felt jellied. He was afraid they could no longer support his weight. His right trouser leg was snagged at the knee; his jacket and linen shirt were rumpled and wrinkled, his tie askew. Blood seeped down along his bruised and swollen cheeks. That artfully administered beating had left him practically a basket case, but he did not turn back or seek help from outsiders. He even ignored those people who stared at him as they loitered past on both sides. He'd started out to visit his fiancée, and nothing was going to stop him: not agony, contusions, or the persistent taste of his own blood.

He paused beside a horse-watering trough outside a brightly illumined Royal Street tavern. Through the bat-winged door, disembodied sounds of banjos, singing, and careless laughter of strangers spewed out on musky lamp beams, splashing on the walk around him and adding to the nightmarish quality of this night.

He braced his upper legs against the stone trough. He felt he had fallen into some new rat hole, plunging into a strange and darkling existence unlike anything he'd ever known in all his life before. He'd lived almost uneventfully for nearly a year and, suddenly, he was attacked from the dark by men who called him Paul Lavedon. This was like a lightning bolt from the blue and didn't make sense, even in the mindless world through which his Furies pursued him.

He bent over the trough and washed the blood from his face. Scooping up water in his cupped palms, he rinsed his mouth and spat the diluted blood into the cobbled street. Crouched there, he kept dousing his face with cool water until some of his native vigor returned. He ran his fingers through his hair, dried his raw face and hands on a cotton kerchief. He straightened and brushed his clothing as best he could.

He turned then and found his reflection in a faintly lit boutique window. His six-foot frame of winter-wolf leanness stared back at him from the wavy depths of the glass. His snagged, pearl-gray trousers hugged the musculature of his long legs, and the sprigged taffeta waistcoat cinched in the planes of his flat stomach. The black silk stock was slightly askew and he tilted the ends of it, then ran his fingers over the ragged breaks in his squared jaw. Those weals and his split lip were plainly visible, but they were not going to disappear quickly, and there was nothing he could do about them. His fingers explored his jawline and he winced, testing his cheek muscles by stretching his mouth open widely and then clamping his teeth tightly together. God knew he looked far less presentable than he had when he'd set out from his small apartment on Dauphine street, but this wasn't going to stop him, either.

That strange sense of unreality settled down through him again. After these months of comparative calm, suddenly three men jumped him. Robbery had nothing to do with their attack. They seemed unrelated to Hammond Maxwell, and he could think of no reason why strangers should crawl from the dark and try to throttle him in an alley.

He'd missed death—one more time—by inches. The difference was that usually he knew why somebody wanted to maim or kill him. This time he did not know.

He shrugged his jacket up on his shoulders and tried to put the whole ugly business from his mind. Things were truly looking up for him now, and he was not going to lose the advantage he'd amassed this past year. Wavering slightly he hurried through the damp chill of early evening toward St. Charles, the avenue of millionaires, where for months he'd been welcomed as a guest.

Accustomed to the route, for he followed it night and afternoon, and even more often in his recent fantasies, he

paid no attention to street turnings. Though the wind off the river was chilled, he sweated, a marbling of moisture inching down his ribs from his armpits.

He left the loud streets of the French Quarter, crowded and noisy, filled with strange smells and strange accents and strange faces. He followed the banquette along fabulous St. Charles Avenue. The aura and smell and substantiality of wealth and influence pulsated in the very atmosphere. It rose like a rich miasma from plants, shrubs, trees, and flowering hedges. Oleanders flourished: they were thicker and a deeper shade of green, their flowers brighter, along here. The scent of lilacs and magnolias and gardenias wafted on the breeze like some expensive and exotic perfume. Formidable mansions reared in forbidding aloofness behind wrought-iron fences and high stone walls.

Striding past these showplaces, Tommy felt the resurgence of boyhood dreams that had prodded him in Boston, tantalized him in Five Points, and spurred him still. These dreams had been rekindled and restrengthened in this past year as he became aware of the possibilities for wealth and power open to him. Through his mind raced the achievements, the accomplishments possible to him, the fortune he would amass, the clothes from the best tailors, custom-made boots and cravats from London. He could see it burning ahead of him like a holy grail, the triumphs that would carry him where he wanted, above everything else, to be. This was his last masquerade. He swore it. This time he would make it. He would escape his nightmare past, his existence between two worlds, neither slave nor white, and he would stride head up among the rich and elite.

He paused on the walk before the Michel mansion. Of all the gracious homes embellishing St. Charles Avenue, this was the most magnificent. One sensed the security and status in its solid stone and mortar, and its generations of respected family name. The stately, early colonial château was structured of distempered stone, feathered with scallops, and shards of light and shadow passed through tall oriel windows which rose from base to apex of each columned flank.

He walked along the wide pavement from street to lamp-illumined veranda. Even the front door was imposing, deeply inset and overhung by an extended balcony, the whole

surmounted by pillared arches matted with green creepers as old as the house itself. Above the black cypress shakes of the roof, thin stone chimneys reared.

He mounted the wide stone steps, awed after all these months. The most remarkable feature of this estate was its three acres of antique formal gardens, tended by slaves. To the labors of these serfs, an indulgent and ungrudging nature, providing fifty-eight inches of rainfall annually, garlanded flowered esplanades, decorated rich balustrades of fieldstone terraces, deepened the hues around marble fountains. Granite fawns, nymphs, and satyrs cavorted in frozen silence on velvet lawns. Topiary hedges, bright espaliers, and tall, canopied oaks provided beauty and shield and shade.

Ushered into the foyer by a smiling black butler, Tommy waited for Gale to come downstairs. In the months he'd known her, Gale hadn't changed, and it was unlikely that she ever would. He was almost an hour late, but the caramel-colored butler had advised him that Miss Gale was not quite ready to receive him.

He caught his breath involuntarily when Gale did come along that mysterious and sweet-scented upper hallway and posed a moment atop the imposing staircase. She was the loveliest belle of New Orleans. Everybody said that. Her arms, golden to her fingertips, touched at the gleaming balustrade. She raised one slender hand to the bodice of her taffeta dress. She looked delicate and dazzling in blue, with golden hair and golden eyes and golden slipper points winking at the hem of her dress. The warm glow in her lovely face deepened when she smiled down at him.

Staring up at Gale, Tommy admitted his mind could people this room and stairwell with the men who had pursued Gale Michel in the brief months he'd known her, men who had loved her passionately, sworn eternal fidelity, and then somehow faded away like clouds in a high wind.

He had persisted. He was seldom alone with Gale for more than a few minutes at a time because her suitors appeared from the woodwork, forgotten, overlooked, neglected. They came pleading for her favors, threatening suicide, proposing marriage, demanding answers. At one time or another in these recent hectic months, each of them had briefly held precedence in Gale's heart above all others. They came and

went, like the bright summers of her existence, and she clung to them, and wept for them, and then regretfully let them slip away.

Tommy was damned if he would accept this as his fate. He was not going to give her up. He knew what he wanted.

God knew it was an impossible quest which had begun on the road into New Orleans more than twelve months ago. The dream had survived all obstacles. It had flared higher when he met Gale Michel at somebody's Christmas party, and had become obsession when she swore that of all her suitors, she loved only him.

He had come such a long way, following a dream incubated from the faint kernel of hope, the compelling urge to survive. Rather than destroying those letters of reference and recommendation he'd taken from Paul Lavedon's body, he decided to use them to establish himself in this new world.

Luck had made him her darling from the first. He told the people at Cox, Fox, Wakefield and Todd, Attorneys at Law, that his name was Lavedon. He did not say he was Paul Lavedon. But he did present the letter of reference from the late Paul Lavedon's grandfather. Like magic it opened doors for him. He was invited to read law in their offices as a clerk. He determined in that instant that what he'd always wanted was a career as a lawyer. The letter of reference was returned to him as a "keepsake." He'd destroyed it at once. The letter of recommendation addressed to Trevor Feaster in Charleston, Tommy had mailed simply to confuse the issue. If the real Paul Lavedon was not in New Orleans, perhaps he'd gone east to Charleston.

The Lavedon family had written to Paul Lavedon at Cox, Fox, Wakefield and Todd. The letter was delivered routinely to Tommy. He composed a careful, guarded, official corporation reply, stating that while Cox, Fox, Wakefield and Todd had a *Lavedon* in its employ, Paul Lavedon had elected to seek greener pastures, perhaps in Charleston or Richmond.

For this entire year, he'd heard no more from the Lavedon family and he'd almost put them from his mind. He soon learned that Paul Lavedon was a common name in New Orleans. He was one of at least a hundred so christened.

From the moment he'd encountered Gale Michel, he'd been intrigued. When she was obviously fascinated by him,

he began to see how he might climb above the danger line of his fugitive existence to an elite world of wealth and influence. He could marry into the Michel family, one of the exalted names of the Delta country.

Gale came slowly down the stairs smiling, but he saw that her smile was preoccupied. By now, he knew all of her moods so well, and this feeling was heightened when she stood before him, so self-involved she didn't notice how battered his face was.

She gave him a brief, butterfly touch of a kiss, and when he winced at the slight pressure on his torn lip, she truly looked at him. Her eyes widened and she bit her own lip. "Oh, your poor handsome face. It's all walked on. Now you just tell me, Mr. Paul Lavedon, whose stolen mare have you been riding?"

The night garden was a poignantly beautiful setting for her. The wan moon shimmered beyond the spreading water oaks and intensified the shadows of the scented arbors. Rich aromas of roses, magnolias, and honeysuckle trailed enchantment on the soft breezes that riffled streamers of Spanish moss.

"God, how I've missed you," he whispered.

Gale remained distant, remote, and preoccupied. When he talked she listened without really caring, or maybe she cared without really listening. She had listened so long, to so many men, and cared so deeply for them all, even if not for very long, that love itself was almost a habit with her now. He didn't give a damn. Nothing was perfect. Gale had beauty, wealth, social position, family influence, and she swore she loved him. She had everything he wanted. She could secure his new world for him, lift him above and beyond the reach of vigilante posses, reward posters, and the unsuspected guns of faceless bounty hunters.

Gale remained close against him, but she had slipped deeper into that moody silence and depression that added to his own sense of wrong. When she looked at him it was as if she brought her inattentive gaze back to his face from another's miles away.

"How can you have missed me?" Her faint smile teased him. "You saw me only last night."

"Yes. But it was early last night."

He put his arms around her and drew her close. A strange quiet pervaded the garden, a waiting tension on the breeze and in the pale light from faint and distant stars. Gale trembled slightly and he felt her responding to his nearness. It was like an oncoming wave that caught her up, even against her will, and swept her along.

She slipped her arms about his waist and dug her nails into his shoulders, pulling him down to her. On her tiptoes, she pressed her face to his. Her mouth tasted sweet, and he forgot the tear in his own lips. His tongue pushed between her teeth and she nursed it greedily, her body quivering. He drew her closer upon the swelling rigidity at his fly. She made little purring sounds deep in her throat and snuggled against him, fascinated. She caressed him with her own fevered femininity, ever so lightly, but distractingly.

His hand roved across the ceramic smoothness of her golden shoulders. He unhooked the fastener at her bodice and slipped his hand over the fullness of her breast and the budlike nipple. She made a half-hearted effort to deter him, but then sighed, allowing him to caress her. Her parted lips sought his desperately, her tongue deep inside his mouth. She sagged upon him.

Suddenly she burst into tears. A shudder wracked her body and she turned her face up to his. "Oh, God," she whispered. "Why do I want you? You of all people?"

Gasping for breath, tears welling in her eyes, she pushed him away and stood, forlorn. Her dress folded away from one sleek breast, but she remained desolated and unaware of her nakedness. He watched her helplessly. "Oh, I'm so unhappy. I shouldn't love you at all, and I know that I truly do love you as I always will, and as I'll never love any other man."

Gently he replaced her bodice and fastened it. "And loving me makes you unhappy?"

She shuddered. "Miserable. Don't you see how wrong it all is? I cannot love you, Paul. I must not."

"Damn it, why not?"

"Don't make me say it. Please. Don't make me hurt you any more than I must."

He caught her arms, forcing her to look up at him. They stood as if isolated from the rest of the world. The veranda

lamp, a distant, pale, and limber beacon, waltzed on the wind. "What is it? Tell me?"

Gale caught her breath, held it. At last, she whispered, "You're so poor, Paul. A poor young lawyer."

He laughed. "Great God. Is that all? Sure, I'm poor as a church mouse now. But I won't always be."

"But it's right now that matters. This moment. Money. Men with money. Position. Family. Influence. This is all my parents talk about—when they talk to me at all. . . . They say you and I are all wrong. Foolish. A young girl's fascination. And the hell of it is, Paul, they're right."

His fingers closed on her biceps. "They're wrong. I vow to you. I'll make more money than any man in this state, given the chance. I shall, because I want to. For you."

Gale shook her head. "Don't break my heart, darling. Don't make me break your heart. I know what you *will* be. I know better than anyone. Better even than you . . . But I can't wait. My family reminds me a hundred times a week. I must grab at happiness right now while I am young enough and beautiful enough to get everything I want."

"You mean money, don't you?"

"Oh, darling, don't make me say it all. It makes me sound so—obnoxious. But I do mean money. Lots of money. My family won't let me marry anyone except an extremely wealthy man. . . . And, deep inside, as much as I love you, I know I can't marry you. . . . I'm sorry. Truly sorry."

The night spun around him, sweet smelling and perilous. It occurred to him that this was the same old nightmare world, after all. He had fooled himself for months, dreaming of wealth, security, an estimable marriage. "Give me a chance," he said.

"You know I can't."

"Tomorrow, I take my bar exam, Gale. Today, old man Wakefield Todd himself called me into his office. Praised my work. Talked about my ability. Said as soon as I pass the bar, he's making me a full partner. No more writing briefs, precedents, bills, threats. A partner. There's a real future for a clever corporation lawyer in New Orleans. A whole world of things going on, most of it illegal, and all of it demanding a lawyer. You've got to give me a chance."

She spoke in a quiet, detached way, almost as if she were

changing the subject. "I'm announcing my engagement tomorrow night, Paul. To Francois Vigneaux. That's why I asked you here tonight."

Rage gorged up in his throat, but when he spoke all he could say was, "Who in hell is Francois Vigneaux?"

Gale sighed. Her eyes brimmed with tears. "There. That shows how impossible it all is. You don't even know Francois Vigneaux . . . one of the oldest Delta families—"

"And probably richer than God."

"Probably. His family is in sugar refining, lumber, shipping. They own two banks. They have a lovely town house, a summer place at Shreveport, and, of course, the family mansion in the cane country."

"Of course. Doesn't everybody?" His mouth twisted bitterly. "You can't do it, Gale. You must not. We planned—"

"It's all settled. I told you. I'm sorry. But I'm not really. . . . I've got to be honest with you. I do love you. But I can't wait for you. I don't want to wait."

He had fought felons, slave-masters, and New York hoodlums, but he was helpless against her remoteness, against her family, against Francois Vigneaux and all his money, and against his own frustrated sense of estrangement in this new life he'd created. He pulled her against him, tense. "Run away with me, Gale. Now. Tonight."

She broke free and shook her head, her voice wan and flat. "Oh, Paul. That's so crazy."

"Not if you love me! We don't have to stay in New Orleans. I've had this amazing offer. A law partnership in Charleston with old Trevor Feaster. One of the most admired and respected lawyers in South Carolina. An old Lavedon family friend . . . We could go to Charleston as soon as I pass the bar. We could honeymoon on the way. . . ."

He stopped talking because he realized he was talking to himself. She only stared up at him. She'd grown more chilled and more remote than ever, with that brand of remoteness only the very rich and self-absorbed ever truly perfect. She no longer listened, and he was helpless against her. It was as if she had gone away from him in this strange night. Though she was still close, he felt alone and bereft. Looking at her was like watching a distant boat across a dark sea at night.

She turned and walked slowly along the path toward that

lamp glowing on her veranda. Tommy followed, shoulders round and steps lagging.

At the foot of the wide stone steps, she hesitated and then turned. Her eyes glittered with agony. She reached out to him. Her hand felt icy against his fevered flesh.

"Oh, Paul," she whispered. "Oh, Paul. Paul. Paul . . ."

His heart surging, Tommy reached for her, but they both heard movement above them on the yellow-glowing veranda. Gale retreated, and Tommy turned to see a swarthy man rise stiffly and awkwardly from a pillowed, wicker wing-back chair.

"Francois," Gale murmured, and Tommy stared as the man slowly and painfully approached them, this man whose fortune and influence had taken Gale from him.

Gale went lightly up the steps and Tommy plodded in her wake. He surveyed Vigneaux, but he was too wrapped in his own agonized loss to be at all observant. Vigneaux looked to be in his early thirties, fashionably, elegantly attired. Tommy supposed bitterly there was probably even the *smell* of money and power about the bastard, but if anything impressed him in that moment, it was that Francois walked oddly, bent over like an old man.

Gale met Francois in the middle of the porch and they stood illuminated in the lamplight. Gale stared up at Francois's face. Her mouth sagged ajar, her eyes stricken. "Francois!" Her voice shook. "What's happened to you?"

Vigneaux made a deprecating downward gesture. "Nothing. I'm all right. A little accident, that's all. Nothing important."

It took a long beat for Tommy to recognize the battered, broken-nosed face of the Creole millionaire. He'd been too involved in his heartbreak and rage to see beyond his own agony. But watching Gale fuss over the battered Vigneaux, Tommy felt his heart lunge, and he knew where he'd seen Gale's wealthy fiancé before.

Tommy bit back savage laughter. Vigneaux sidled like a crab because he had been kneed in the groin, and Vigneaux's nose was broken because Tommy Verder had hit him in his silk-masked face in that Vieux Carre alley.

Vaguely, as from some remote place, he heard Gale com-

miserating with her wounded fiancé. Repressed laughter moiled and simmered and boiled low in Tommy's belly and gorged upward, bitter as wormwood, and spewed across his lips. He stared at Gale and her future husband and laughter erupted from him—raging, uncontrollable, and laced with tears.

III

Tommy let his horse plod into the strange town six hundred miles east of New Orleans without seeing or caring about what went on around him. He rode into the midst of streets astir with boisterous noon crowds.

The clear luminous green of an early April sun splashed over the town, but Charleston seemed nevertheless somber, shadowed, and gloomy, even bathed in light.

At his first glimpse of the city, Tommy felt an unrewarding sense of victory, though the only battle he'd won was over his own desires. Temporarily at least, he had triumphed; he was one hell of a ride from the days and nights of tensions and broken, restless sleep, from Maxwell's reward posters, from the Lavedon family's inquiry, and the desperate need to see Gale one more time even when he knew it would be fruitless. Distance took care of that.

Charleston sprawled along the rim of its own mammoth natural harbor. It reared in snobbish glory, almost one hundred and fifty years old in a raw young nation, a haughty, regal, and aging dowager of a town, with the spice and variety of Irish, French, and English cities. Her streets were paved, her markets clearly defined, her mansions forbiddingly walled, her great oaks dripping moss older than the republic itself. Named for King Charles II of England, the community had reigned as capital of South Carolina until forty years ago. Unlike most seaboard towns settled by sects and guarded zealously against outside intrusion, Charleston was—if reluctantly—a melting pot. Ten years after the British established the port at the junction of the Cooper and Ashley rivers

as a port of call for its men-of-war and trading vessels, French Huguenots arrived, followed in the middle of the next century by thousands of Acadian refugees. During the Revolutionary War, captured by English forces, with the Union Jack flying defiantly everywhere, the settlement became home for the Irish-impressed seamen who jumped British ships, for Italian fishermen, homeless Indians, enslaved and freed blacks. Each race, nationality, and ethnic group etched its own imprint, each erected its own magnificent edifices honoring its own gods—St. Michael's, the Huguenot church, and the colonists' powder magazine.

He worked his way through narrow streets crowded with carriages, black vendors, carts loaded with cotton, and wagons piled high with truck crops. People hurried in the silvery sunlight, entering and leaving shops, loitering along the walks.

An open carriage clattered past him, a gleaming vehicle drawn by two high-stepping horses and driven by a top-hatted Negro coachman in rust black, chin tilted skyward. Gathered in facing seats of the carriage tonneau was a bouquet of lovely young women, their laughter as bright as cymbals, frocks and faces fresh and enchanting, bodies supplely rounded and graceful under dainty parasols.

Tommy glanced at them, then moved over on the street as the carriage passed, the girls giggling and lowering their gazes becomingly. As he knew they would, they looked up once more in a game stylized and conventional. Exhaling heavily, he ignored them.

He winced. He'd sunk low into depression when he didn't even gaze at beautiful women anymore. The hell of it was he hated Gale, and hating her, hated all her sisters equally. That despair and hatred had sent him east. He'd sold out everything he'd accumulated, and ended up with a small leather poke of gold eagles, uprooted and aimless again. Whether he thought about leaving, or somehow staying in Gale's indifferent orbit, his heart sank like a stone in a cistern. He still wanted Gale, still needed desperately the security of her family name and fortune, but there was no way he could have her and, despite all his grandiose, shattered plans, he somehow had to find a new direction for his life.

Now that he'd departed New Orleans and all its painful memories, and traveled hundreds of miles by horseback, he'd

learned only one thing: He could leave Louisiana, but escaping Gale Michel was not that easy. He could not stay in the same town with her after she announced her engagement to Francois Vigneaux. He had to escape that jealousy, the devil's own lure, which reels a lover into hell while he still plods blindly through yesterday's heaven.

Charleston seemed as good a destination as any. He had a job offer. It was hundreds of miles from Gale and her insufferable happiness. Escaping her and her lover and her town was all that mattered. But she trailed him across those lonely trails east. A hundred times he almost turned back. Only his terrible pride sustained him at all.

He wandered in a senseless maze: a life without love, with fire and beauty gone, the excitement of hurrying to Gale, the magic of holding her, the wonder of her kisses, the heat and fever of her lovely body, all denied him, while he was not allowed to forget a moment or a kiss or a caress.

Charleston. What the hell, it didn't matter where he was. Now, more than ever, he believed that he and all men were alone, in rudderless, unseaworthy craft, borne about crazily on an empty sea by the wine-sodden breath of unaccountable chance. . . .

In the busy downtown, he reined in and tied his horse at a metal hitching post. He crossed the walk and entered a quietly fashionable, two-storied stone building with bay windows, overhanging eaves, and ornate gables.

He paused for a moment in the narrow upstairs hallway before he entered Trevor Feaster's office.

He stared at that brass plate on the door facing. It read only, TREVOR FEASTER, ATT'Y AT LAW. But it meant much more, a hell of a lot more. It meant he was going into the presence of the most prestigious and respected attorney south of Washington, D.C. And he was going into this firm as a partner, a full-fledged lawyer, with a whole new life. A damned exulting feeling despite despair like a stone in his chest.

He shrugged his weathered jacket up on his shoulders, straightened his tie and ran his fingers through his hair. He brushed the tops of his dusty boots against the backs of his calves. Then, drawing a deep breath, he rang the doorbell. The door opened at last and a tall thin man with graying red

hair, narrow face, aquiline nose, tobacco-stained lips, coatless and collar opened, peered at him a moment and then opened the door wide.

"Lavedon?"

"Yes. My name is Lavedon."

"Paul, my boy. I've been expecting you. Come in."

The office was confusion: an old desk piled high with papers, books, and briefs. Trevor Feaster had to move law tomes from a chair so that Tommy could sit down. Feaster smiled without apology. "A working lawyer. That's what I am. Fifteen hours a day. Seven days a week. They talk about luck. One lawyer is rich, the man across the hall lives on loans from the bank. But I believe it's all in energy. Your rewards come precisely in return for the amount of sweat you work up. Eh? Eh? . . . Well, how are you, my boy? Know you're tired. Won't keep you long today. A hell of a long trip from New Orleans, eh, my boy? Eh? Eh?"

Tommy said, "I'm looking forward to getting to work. I don't like sweating, but I do admire money in large amounts."

A slight, taut moment of silence hung in the cluttered office. In that brief span, Tommy heard shouts of vendors, the clatter of wagons and carriages from the street below. While Feaster smiled, there was a look of tension deepening the wrinkles around his pale eyes.

"Yes." Feaster nodded his elongated head so vigorously his wispy hair danced on his freckled scalp. "Well, why don't we get acquainted? Eh?" He took up some envelopes from a pigeonhole in his rolltop desk. "Mail for you. Beat you here by a day or so."

Feaster handed him the small packet of letters. Idly Tommy thumbed through them. His hand and his heart stopped for an instant. One of the envelopes was from Gale. There was no return address, but for him it needed none. The faint, unforgettable fragrance of her attacked him. Heart slugging, he stuck the letters into his pocket, trying to conceal the emotions warring inside him and to concentrate on the distinguished attorney and the newfound life before him.

Feaster cleared his throat loudly in the silence and toyed with a letter opener on his desk. "Well, by gad, how you've grown. Fifteen years since I last saw you."

Tommy smiled. "Likely, I've put on a little weight, all right."

"Tall. Well built. Handsome. You'll cut a hell of a figure before our juries. Take after your father's folks, all right. All big men. Six feet at least. Certainly good to see you again. Brings back warm memories of your family. Good people. The Lavedons and the Gallaudetts. Yes. Good people."

Tommy's heart sank slightly and then beat irregularly as he waited for the aging lawyer to get on with it. They both knew why he was here.

"I've looked forward to coming to work for you," Tommy said into the strained silence.

The attorney flushed red from neckline to wispy hair roots. He cleared his throat again. "Everything's changed," he admitted at last. He stared at the backs of his hands. "I tried to get in touch with you before you left New Orleans."

"You've decided I'm not good enough?"

"Oh, my God no, my boy. You're well qualified. I got nothing but glowing reports from Wakefield Todd. That was before he knew I wanted you to come in with me. . . . We may as well come right out with it, eh?"

Tommy exhaled heavily. "Please do, sir."

"It's a hellish situation, Lavedon. I regret it, despise and oppose it. But I'm almost helpless against it. You see, my wife's nephew finished law school at the University of Virginia this spring. I never considered taking him in with me. . . . Not until my wife and her mother and all the other women in the family started in on me . . ."

Feaster went on talking, but Tommy stopped listening. Another twist in the maze into which he had stepped that night in the French Quarter alley. There was no job. That was the final toted-up sum of all the attorney was trying not to say.

All those hundreds of miles by horseback, exposed to evil weather, with only the hope of starting anew to sustain him, and now Feaster calmly advised him there was no partnership, no job, nothing.

"I understand," he managed to say at last.

Feaster winced. "Of course you *don't* understand. How could you? Frankly, I don't even understand how my women could insist upon such a thing. But all I've learned about

women in my long and misspent life is that I'll never figure them out.''

Tommy said nothing, and Feaster sat a moment, chewing at his thumb knuckle. ''I'm sorry,'' he said at last. Then he brightened faintly. ''I can not send you away empty-handed. Of course I insist upon giving you a hundred dollars in gold eagles to cover expenses of your long trip. But I want to do more, if you'll let me. I feel ill. The final responsibility for this fiasco is mine. All mine. I've spoken to a few law firms. A couple are quite reputable. No partnership offers but—''

''Thanks, but I can go back to Wakefield Todd. Maybe not to a partnership after the way I walked out, but a job.''

''I have one other suggestion which might interest you. I can't wholly recommend it, but it might interest you. I know it would have intrigued and fascinated me when I was your age—looking for excitement and the opportunity to make a great deal of money in a short time. . . .'' Feaster waited, and when Tommy nodded slightly, waiting, he said, ''I have a letter from a former client of mine. A mulatto of great wealth down in Haiti. His name is Jeoffrin Icres. Icres has taken over a twenty-thousand-acre plantation down there. Now he finds he needs a white overseer, a man versed in law, management, one not afraid of danger or hard work. Icres asked for a recommendation. I thought of you at once. You see, Icres is offering a sixty-forty percentage to the farm manager who can rebuild his plantation and make it profitable again.''

Tommy sat forward again. Here was a job that offered everything he wanted: escape, distance, opportunity for wealth, and work that would leave little time for remembering and regretting and hating. ''Sounds interesting,'' he said.

Feaster nodded. ''I thought it might. But there is much opposed to it as a rewarding undertaking.''

''Nobody ever got rich without taking chances.''

The attorney gave him an odd look. ''This is Haiti I'm talking about, my boy. What do you know about the history of Haiti?''

Tommy shrugged. ''Nothing.''

"Well, you better learn something about it before you step into something as dangerous as that job. The history of Haiti is bloody. A French colony. The blacks were mistreated and exploited. Then, about fifteen years ago, under a man named Henri, the blacks revolted against the French and all whites on the island. There ensued a bloodbath hardly equaled in the history of man. Not a white was allowed to live. Not a fine mansion belonging to the whites was left standing. Fire, rape, pillage, and murder. They drove the whites out, all right. They took over all property and the government of their island. But this was only the beginning of the nightmare. The Haitian blacks, almost to a man, were like backward children on a rampage. Now they haven't the knowledge, the skills in diplomacy, politics, government, finance, business, or agriculture to run their nation. They have no doctors, except voodoo witch doctors. They have no attorneys. No one with skills to run anything. The poor country, all these years later, remains in hell, deeper in hell than ever because of the continual blood coups and the bloody battles between army and civilians, between army generals and politicians. Icres admits a white man's life is not worth a dime down there. The whole island is in chaos. But Icres and other men as smart and farsighted as he, realize they must bring in intelligent men who can clear up some of that terror and carnage and waste and get the country started again. A breathtaking challenge for a young man, but at the same time it is too dangerous to consider seriously."

Tommy sat a moment in silence. At last, his voice empty, he said, "Sounds like what I am looking for. I hope you'll write to this Icres and tell him I want the job. . . . Hell, tell him I'm begging for it."

When he left the office and walked out into the busy early afternoon street, Tommy felt slightly better. At least his life had a new direction. Feaster kept warning that he was walking into hell. But what Feaster didn't know was that he had plunged into hell weeks ago back in New Orleans.

He touched Gale's letter in his pocket and sought some secluded nook. He found a lonely spot on one of the piers at the harbor.

Holding his breath, he tore open the letter. It was brief and yet devastating. She wrote:

My dearest. I love you. I was wrong. I love you. You were right. Please, come back to me.

He sat gripping the wadded note in his fist. Oddly, despite his confused emotions, the dark world around him lightened, the somber dwellings, stores and shops and ugly streets suddenly gleamed, bright and drenched with sunlight. How strange life was! One word and gloom lifted like morning mists, and everything brightened and he lived again, even if only on a self-centered, unprincipled whim, and for only a little while, and on hope as fragile as butterfly wings.

IV

Late dusk overtook Tommy on a lonely backcountry trace. He drove an aged single-seat buggy, hauled reluctantly by a tired dun-colored carriage horse. Three days into rural Alabama, he headed southwest toward New Orleans, answering an irresistible siren call one more time, despite all the warnings of instincts, reason, and intellect. He followed his heart for one simple reason: He heeded Gale's urging and its promise of redress and final victory.

Threat of a thunderstorm charged the atmosphere. Clouds piled up, thick and menacing along the horizon. Raging winds lashed tall trees. He searched for an ordinary, a tavern, even a farmhouse where he might buy a night's lodging and fodder for his horse. He found nothing. The countryside lay ominous and dark, a land forsaken to wildcats, oppossum, deer, and swamp growth.

He'd almost reconciled himself to sleeping curled on the buggy seat and prey to the elements when he glimpsed a faint lamplight on the trail ahead. He slapped the reins across the rump of his plodding horse.

It was the ugliest farmhouse he'd ever seen. Loathsome decay ground into the very plaster and putty of the aged, two-story clapboard structure. Scabrous paint peeled, wilted, and flaked off, wood slabs laid bare like open wounds; broken windowpanes, carelessly patched with scrap lumber and croker sacking, winked obscenely.

The ugly old dwelling was more than dilapidated, it was repugnant. There was not only a look of poverty—bare substance was almost a way of life in this Alabama backcountry—

there was chronic neglect and squalid disrepair, as if the people who existed within it had abandoned it to the elements because they did not care.

But it was a place of human habitation, and it was almost full dark, late. He had no idea how far it might be to the next nearest settlement or farm.

Lightning snapped white, sizzling in the crackling atmosphere.

Tommy reined in beside the sagging front steps. A dog lunged up from beneath the airspace below the veranda, barked a couple of times and then cringed, retreating, tail between its legs. Tommy shouted, "Anybody home?"

Silence hung oppressively in the storm-charged atmosphere. Finally the front door, hanging crookedly on a loose hinge, was pulled cautiously open. A gun barrel appeared first, followed timidly by a creature from a nightmare. The man holding the gun was no more than five feet tall, balding, with a huge head that seemed to grow out of a humped back without any neck at all. His twisted shoulders were massive for such a small man. His chest and trunk were outsized over short legs in runover boots.

The man hesitated, suspicious and wary, on the rotting porch. After a brief delay, two more people emerged through the door. They stood behind the little troll with the gun. The second man was also short, his massive head topped with wild-standing, strawlike hair, mottled Roman nose, and protruberant staring eyes that seemed never to blink or to settle on anyone or anything for longer than a few seconds at a time. The girl was an octoroon, and as daintily lovely as these two white-skinned freaks were ugly. Though the girl stood straight, back pressed against the paint-peeled slab siding, she appeared to cringe in terror.

The fear in the faces of the three people was the clearest aspect in this strange encounter. The man with the gun was ready to press the trigger. It would not take much to set him off. The other two were as terrified, but such an uncommon occurrence as a stranger arriving in the storm-threatened dusk kept them standing, silent and staring. The octoroon girl had lighted two tallow dips and held them before her in a cracked dish, her cupped hand protecting the guttering flame.

"Right wicked weather," Tommy said.

"What you want heah, Mistuh?" the gnome with the gun said, voice high-pitched and nasal.

"I'd be pleased if you could see fit to take me in for the night. I need stable and fodder for my horse. Not too particular about myself. I could sleep in the hayloft, if you've got nothing else. I'd expect to pay you—anything you figured to be fair."

The girl remained where she was, but the two misshapen men sidled together. Lightning rent the sky, turning the world fiercely white. Thunder rattled loose house timbers. The men whispered together, neither of them taking their gazes from Tommy.

The man with the gun spoke first; he appeared to be the older, the head of the house. "How fur you say you come?"

"From Charleston, over in South Carolina. Headed toward New Orleans."

"What fur you comin' so far?" the man asked. "You runnin' away from something?"

"On my way home to New Orleans to get married," Tommy said. "Going to take my lady all the way to Haiti on our honeymoon. I need lodging. First place I've seen in over ten miles."

"Only place," the twisted man agreed. "Nothin' habitable nearer than five miles in toward Lowcut. My name's Cobb. Hobart Cobb. This here is my brother Junior." The high-pitched voice swelled faintly with pride. "And this here is our slave. Name of Lily."

Tommy nodded. He could understand the man's pride in the lovely slave girl. Not only was she incredibly pretty and young, but she was likely the last valuable chattel remaining to the two Cobbs.

"You can stay the night," Junior Cobb said in a fluting voice even higher than Hobart's. "But hit'll cost ye—five dollars."

Tommy shrugged. "Beggars can't be choosers, Mr. Cobb. Not on a wretched night like this."

When Tommy returned from the lean-to barn where he unhitched his horse, fed, watered, and rubbed it down, it had begun to rain. Lowering his head, he ran across the yard. The Cobbs and Lily remained unmoving on the sagging porch.

"Watch them steps, Mistuh," Hobart Cobb said. "Kinely rickety. Been meanin' to fix it." He jerked his head. "Lead the way with the light, Lily."

Tommy followed the Cobbs and their slave girl along a bare and musty corridor. Candlelight flickered despairingly against dirt-smeared walls. Tommy saw that most of the rooms were empty of furniture. Lily led them into the kitchen, the heart of the house, furnished with odds and ends: bare pinewood table, a few chairs, an aged butt-sprung leather recliner with ragged quilt, and a huge cast-iron, wood-burning stove. All windows were shoved open and propped, but the heat in the room was intense. "Set," Hobart Cobb said, jerking his outsized head toward one of the cane-bottom kitchen chairs. "You, Lily. Fetch us a fresh jug o' corn-squeezin's, an' then you can put the supper on. Ain't got all that much to eat tonight, Mistuh, but you welcome to share what we got."

"That's right." Junior nodded his head again and again. "But maybe you'd care to pay us in advance for yo' lodgin's. You bein' a stranger and all."

Tommy nodded and paid. Junior shoved the money into his pocket and bobbed his head, grinning in a grotesque way toward his brother. Hobart sat down in the leather chair and pulled the quilt over his knees. Lily poured white-colored whiskey into pint mason jars and handed the liquor around. Hobart finished off his three fingers of alcohol before Lily got the jars to Junior and Tommy. Hobart grunted, holding out the jar toward the servant. She took it from him and refilled it. The little man watched her, eyes glittering. "We makes our own moonshine, Mistuh. What you say your name was?"

Tommy introduced himself. He drank off the straight whiskey, holding his breath. He nearly retched, but managed to keep his agony from showing in his face.

"Good, ain't it?" Hobart said. "Lily, pour Mr. Lavedon another. And you might as well hot up my drink whils't you're up an' all."

By now Lily had the food steaming on the bare table. Hobart had not lied. The food was simple fare: grits, fried ham, and red-eye gravy. Hobart continued to drink from his mason jar during the meal. Junior drank also, but less greedily than his older brother. Junior grinned at Tommy as he shoved runny grits into his whiskered mouth from a serving spoon grasped in his fist. "Our slave. Right purt, ain't she, Mr. Lavedon?"

Tommy nodded, noticing that Lily watched him covertly from her chair beside the stove. "A beautiful girl." He smiled at her.

Hobart laughed, a strange screeching sound. "Almost white, she is," he boasted. "Our old man laid with Lily's maw. Lily's maw slept ever' blesset night at the foot of Paw's bed. Ready to serve him when he reached for her."

Sighing, Tommy glanced toward the girl who still covertly watched him. Junior said, "You, Lily, stand up and show yo'self to our guest. Do I have to cane you to teach you manners?"

Quivering, the slave girl stood up across the dimly lighted room. A strange gleam of fear illumined her large black eyes. She was shy, afraid of being the center of attention, wary of strangers.

"Lily's a goddamn pretty wench," Junior Cobb said. "Ain't titted out much as she will be. But hell, she's young, ain't more'n fifteen plantin's no way. Give her time. Lots of black girls don't have big tits, but Lily will. Her maw had beauties—even when she was old—into her thirties." Junior ordered her to step more into the light. "Right fine, ain't she?"

"She looks beautiful," Tommy agreed.

"She jus' another black slut," Hobart said.

Junior laughed. "Ole Hobart ain't no way much excited by women—white or black."

"Nevah you mind that," Hobart said. "Lily, get me another drink."

"Done emptied the jug, Mastuh." Lily's voice quavered.

Hobart looked as if he might leap to his feet and attack her. His face went livid. "Well, god damn it, git me another 'un. Man can't stand on one leg. Eh, Mr. Lavedon? Eh? Eh?"

Tommy tried to smile. After three drinks, he was muddled—and afraid that if he stood up, he would stagger. He knew he was drunk because he was no longer stunned at the gnomelike brothers, or offended by the seminal odors of Junior's clothing, or sickened by the stench of filth and neglect that permeated this old house.

Hobart drank three more mason jars of straight corn whiskey. He showed no ill effects, except he began to belch loudly, break wind furiously and helplessly, and to yawn extravagantly. "Time for bed," Hobart announced. "I'll just

let Junior and Lily show you to your room. Hope you sleep well."

Lily led the way into a bedroom up the corridor. It was a dank and musty crib, open to the storm which roared past the windows without cooling the interior of the house at all. Lily lighted a small whale-oil lamp on a bedside table. The bed was aged, with rope springs, corn-shuck mattress, and a filthy blanket. Tommy felt his stomach turn over.

Junior Cobb closed the corridor door and sagged against it, watching Tommy with disturbing intensity, mouth twisted with false smiling. He said, "Leave Lily in heah to bedwench for you an' you like, Mistuh."

Tommy smiled but shook his head. "Not tonight. Been a long, tirin' day and, too, I'm not used to drinking with a man like Hobart."

The slave girl abruptly burst into tears, sobbing heartbrokenly, and Junior's strange face twisted with his rage. He looked as if he could kill this young stranger who so casually rejected the best he had to offer. Tommy realized the depth and sinister threat of his error.

"What's-a matter?" Junior said. "Ain't she purt enough? Hell, a piece like that is wuth ten dollars anywhere. She ain't good enough?"

Lily's weeping rose against the storm beyond the window. Tommy said, "I'm sorry. She's lovely. Sure she can stay—if she wants to."

Tommy sat on a broken chair to pull off his boots. Junior made no move to leave. The little troll remained sagged against the door as if he might spend the night there, staring. "Is there something you wanted, Mr. Cobb?" Tommy asked.

Junior shrugged. "Jus' thought to chat for a while. No use to try to deceive a smart young city fellow like you. Me and my brother is livin' on hard times, right now. Barely got enough to live on. All we got left to sell is Lily. Thought you might like to buy her."

Tommy heard Lily's sharp intake of breath and he glanced toward her. Junior said, "We so hard up, I tell you what. Give you a chance to buy a pretty little fifteen-year-old slave girl for—for one hundred dollars. Know she'd bring five to seven hundred at vendue in New Orleans. But got no way to git her there. You pay me one hundred right now and you

bought yourself some sweet black flesh, young enough to be the eatin' kind an' all, I tell you. And I know for a fact it plumb tastes *good.*''

Tommy shook his head. He was reeling, the room spinning around him. ''There's no doubt this girl is worth at least seven hundred dollars. But I don't need a slave girl, Mr. Cobb,'' he said. ''An' I don't need a bedwench, either. I'm getting married as soon as I get back to New Orleans.''

''Sure you are. Sure you are.'' Junior nodded his large head, grinning in that grotesque way. ''Lily can cook, do housework, she's respectful an' housebroke—''

''I do most lovely needlework, Mastuh,'' Lily said in a faint voice.

''She make a lovely wedding gift for your intended,'' Junior said.

Tommy realized how drunk he was, because he found himself considering this suggestion. Lily was a beautiful and dainty girl, all right. She would make a surprising and extraordinary wedding present for Gale. And he had the extra one hundred that old Trevor Feaster had insisted upon giving him when the partnership hadn't panned out in Charleston. If he took Gale to Haiti with him, she would need an extra body slave to serve her. And if Gale didn't want her, he could make himself a profit of six hundred dollars from the slave market in New Orleans. Buyers would drool over a lovely piece of flesh like this. ''All right,'' he said. ''You got a deal, Mr. Cobb. I'll buy Lily, as a gift for my bride.''

Without thinking, Tommy took the poke of gold from his pocket. He counted out the five gold eagles that made Lily his property. But when he looked up, his blood chilled at the wild, covetous look igniting Junior's eyes at the sight of that small, gold-packed leather pouch.

V

He lay upon the corn-shuck mattress, the room swimming drunkenly about him, hotly aware of Lily's bare, heated young body pressed against his back. Her small breasts—taut, hard-nippled, incindiary—impaled him. That delicate muff at her thighs caressed his hips faintly, maddeningly. He felt her slender, long-fingered hand move under his bicep and caress the cordlike tendons of his chest and then move slowly, tantalizingly down the flat planes of his belly. Her fingers fondled their way almost to the line of his pubic hair, and lingered, then moved lightly away. His flesh crawled deliciously, as if she held glowing, fiery coals in her palms. The touch of a fire-carrying butterfly!

He tried to resist her and he could not. Damn his soul! Here he was panting in the darkness, his heart thundering at the touch and nearness of this octoroon succubus. Lord help him, when her light-fingered hand strayed across his chest and down past his navel, his maulstick quivered and sprang upward, erect. This slave girl was driving him out of his gourd, and he would have her now if it brought down the walls of this rotting old mansion around them. His need at this instant was too fearful to be stayed. Every touch of her hesitant, creeping fingers burned him and made him want her more.

It had begun while that damned dwarf Junior Cobb loitered at the door, insisting they all have one more drink.

He'd watched Junior pour out three stiff drinks into mason jars. Junior limped forward and handed the liquor to them, a strange wildness glittering his suet-pocketed eyes.

Tommy had watched Lily sip at her whiskey. He saw that getting her drunk was a rite in this strange house. The Cobb brothers got this lovely slave girl liquored-up at night when they wanted to use her body in whatever erotic manner they'd dreamed up during the day. Lily drank slowly, almost reluctantly, and yet she consumed the alcohol to the last drop. Her eyes touched at Tommy over the rim of the jar. For a moment those liquid eyes devoured him, and then they fell away shyly, a maddening kind of shyness.

He watched her in the guttering saffron light, the tightly curled ebony hair damp with perspiration, the olive complexion, the delicate perfection of her features, the odd black eyes, at once bold and timid as a doe. When their gazes touched, she tried to smile, failed, and then lowered her eyes under incredibly long and sooty lashes. She was a lovely child. But that's what she was, he warned himself, a fifteen-year-old girl. No matter how she'd been used and misused by these Cobb men, she was a child, and he meant to keep distance between them, even if they shared the same bed.

Junior began to talk, voice high-pitched and fluting, about all the kinds of sex the slave girl enjoyed, responded to, and even, under the right circumstances, begged for. "You spank her," Junior mumbled. "You part her legs and spank her good down there, till she turns fiery red, and she goes wild for you."

Though Tommy tried to ignore the weird and twisted little man, he saw that nothing would stopper that mouth now. Junior Cobb got his excitement from saying the forbidden words, mouthing them, outlining the fantasies, talking, talking, talking. . . .

Tommy found the room spinning about his head. Thankfully Junior's high-pitched voiced faded. Though Cobb continued to spew out his erotic words and pictures, Tommy could no longer understand him, or even hear him clearly at all. He realized he was on the verge of passing out. He even wondered if he would ever wake up if he passed out in this old house, but he was too far gone to care. He could only sway there and cling helplessly to a fragile consciousness.

He was only vaguely aware that finally Junior departed. He knew that Lily undressed him, pulling off his boots, his shirt, trousers, and underclothing. She took a long time. He fell

back across the mattress, only dimly awake and barely aware. Her tender hands removed each piece of apparel and lingered for a long time over his bared body. You couldn't blame her, enjoying a whole body after being forced to service those ugly, twisted Cobb brothers. Her hands stripped fabric from his muscled chest and from his waist and hips. She delighted in what she saw, what she fondled and caressed. She made little purring sounds of approval and pleasure in her throat and when he was naked, she undressed, dropping her own clothing in a heap upon the floor.

When she crawled in under the scruffy blanket beside him, he turned his back to her and pretended to be asleep, but he did not escape her. There was no way to escape her, no way to resist her and, at last, panting through parted lips, he sagged over on his back and let her clutch his throbbing rigidity in her fevered fist, feeling her face coming close, her lips parted, her breath hot. . . .

He lay for what seemed a long time—probably less than a full minute—letting the night wind dry the sweat on his body. His heart thudded erratically, choking the base of his parched throat.

"You all right, Mastuh?" Lily whispered in the darkness.

"Yes." He heard some stranger's voice assuring her.

For some moments she held his staff in her fist and they stared at each other in awkward silence. She was so damned young—criminally young. He didn't want a child. Yet her swift breath and quivering fingers betrayed to him how aroused she was, and this aroused him. There was a calmness about her. She was far less nervous than he.

How pretty she was! A lovely brown doll. Petite, dainty, and fragile. In the wan dark, her skin had the liquidity of pale chocolate. Her crisp black hair lay damp about her face; her eyes glittered. Her gentle beauty distressed him almost as much as her tender age. She looked too gentle, too young and vulnerable for what he so abruptly and fiercely needed. Even as he thought this, something happened inside him, something flipped over in the pit of his empty belly and his groin ached savagely. This fragile, gentle, and beautiful young girl was his slave, his to use as he wished. God help them both!

His voice sounded choked. "When did—they—start you doing this, Lily?"

"I don't recall, Mastuh. . . . All I knows is, Ah nevah wanted to do it no way, until now. . . . Now I wants to. I wants to do what you wish. . . . Whatever you wish, Mastuh . . . I your slave. . . ."

He sweated, watching her. Even the tone of her voice stirred and excited him. He managed to say, "You don't have to do this if you don't want to."

Her huge eyes widened and her face grew pallid and tense. "You don't want me, Mastuh?"

"I didn't say that. But you are a young girl. . . . You don't have to."

Her soft voice was heated, breathless, her fingers moved on him. "I has to if you wants me to, Mastuh. . . . I wants to pleasure you."

She stroked him, and he bit down on his bottom lip in agonized delight. Her sweated body glistened, dampness gleaming in the high-standing rise of taut young breasts, and standing like dew in the triangular down at her thighs, and shimmering the length of her shapely legs. She crouched over him, unselfconsciously naked. Loving and being loved was as natural to this slave girl as eating, sleeping, breathing. He took her breasts, like tender fruit, in his hands. She went wild at his touch. The heat of her body penetrated through him, burning away the last of his restraints. He lay beside her, letting her fondle his hardness. Lily looked up and met his eyes timidly. "You mighty purty, Mastuh. Mighty purty. I wild to love you."

Tommy resisted no longer. Her eager, fiery hands inflamed him unbearably. She lay back in a fluid motion, drawing him after her. He came down upon her and she thrust her hips upward.

Lily gasped in sweet agony. "Gawd, Mastuh. That so lovely."

She flailed her hips, battering him mindlessly, digging her nails into his back. He clung to her as she shuddered again and again in orgiastic release. They sagged together, spent, but Lily held fiercely to him, refusing to let him go. In the simmering liquid of her thighs, he grew rigid again. And again. He never knew afterward how many times they rose to that nerve-shattering, mind-numbing, dizzying crag of ecstasy.

Tommy did not know when he plunged into sleep at last.

They sprawled close: sweated, wet, hot, clinging. She slept first. He heard her deep, exhausted breathing in the darkness and then he slept as if drugged. And God knew he had been drugged, by her beauty and vigor and tender violence.

He was wakened suddenly and violently. Lily sat beside him in the darkest hours before dawn, shaking his shoulders, digging her nails into him. He fought his way up from that drugged sleep, aware that Lily had one hand clamped tightly over his mouth to keep him from crying out.

VI

In the vague, humid darkness, Lily nodded her head toward something across the room.

He turned cautiously on the goosedown pillow. Shadow stirred within shadow. His heartbeat went out of sync, thudding oddly, seeming to resound in his empty belly.

The aged door was being opened stealthily, with agonizing slowness, on dry hinges ready to scream in protest.

His eyes grew accustomed to the darkness of the breathless room. He recognized the gnomelike figure of Junior Cobb sidling through the barely opened door.

Tommy felt the sudden flaring of panic and anger. The only emotion he didn't experience at all was surprise. He was not shocked to waken to this intrusion. He'd anticipated it. He'd even wondered if he slept, would he ever wake up in this sinister house. But under Lily's erotic ministrations, he'd grown careless, relaxed, and had fallen into exhausted sleep. He stared at that misshapen shadow creeping into his room, thinking, What delayed you, Junior?

It was as if no one in that bedroom breathed. As if this isolated world itself stood still, tautly waiting. Beside him on the rumpled bed, Lily was as rigid as a statue, motionless. Across the room, Junior Cobb moved resolutely, yet cautiously, like a cat stalking prey in the dark. Tommy felt as if he'd forgotten how to breathe. Naked, he was unarmed, helpless. His gun lay on the chair beside the bed, an impossible distance away. The first thing he saw as Junior slithered into the room was the pale and wicked glitter of the six-inch blade of a hunting knife.

Shaken, he watched Cobb inch over the aged flooring. The little man knew what he wanted, knew precisely where he was going. He located Tommy's trousers and searched until he discovered the leather poke of gold.

Tommy tensed himself to yell out, but remained unmoving. Cobb stood, clutching the money bag. He exhaled deeply, pleased with himself and his take. He stared toward the bed and Tommy realized the man's vision was impaired. Cobb was unable to see that Lily sat up against the head of the bed. He seemed satisfied that both of them were asleep. Warily he turned toward the corridor door.

Reluctantly Tommy decided to let him go. Almost upon arrival, he'd determined that if he left the Cobb manse alive and with a whole skin, he'd be fortunate. That knife in those oversized hands was lethal, and his gun was out of reach. If he made a move, he was as good as dead. Let the misshapen little bastard take the money. As soon as Cobb was gone, he could dress and clear out, as stealthily as he could, broke but still among the quick.

Resigned, he remained unmoving, aware of the backcountry silences, of Lily's chilled hand pressed over his mouth, of Cobb's bent form moving into the shadows near the slightly opened door.

Suddenly he saw Cobb hesitate and turn slowly toward the foot of the bed. Then like a crazed banty rooster, the dwarf lunged through the air, coming over the foot of the bed upon him, the knife held high in his fist.

Cobb was an accomplished killer. That this would not be his first murder was apparent in everything he did, even in the astonishing way he tiptoed toward the door, as if to lull his prey, even if he were awake. His attack was abrupt and skillfully planned.

Cobb landed like some ogre from a nightmare, full upon Tommy. His short legs clamped, viselike, and his left hand went expertly, clawing and clutching at Tommy's throat. The knife was yanked upward and was coming down toward his chest before Tommy could even react.

Tommy would have been dead, but Lily snagged at Cobb's wrist at the last instant. The knife was already descending in its deadly arc when Lily's hand deflected the blow.

Junior snorted out in fury and outrage. He hesitated long

enough to backhand Lily, sending her sprawling over the side of the bed.

In that instant, Tommy managed to lever his hips, thighs, and legs up from the deep mattress. Even though his legs were clamped around Tommy, Cobb was unsettled for a moment, fighting to right himself and to swing that knife in his fist. Those talonlike fingers never relaxed at Tommy's throat, nails digging in as if he meant to rip out his Adam's apple.

With his left forearm twisted outward, Tommy caught at Cobb's wrist. The razor-sharp blade slashed his flesh and blood spurted. His fingers closed and wrenched with savagery born of terror and loathing. He'd never encountered such a creature in his sickest nightmare. They snarled at each other like infuriated jackals.

They thrashed about on the rope-slung mattress, sinking into its spongy depths. Tommy managed to paralyze Cobb's hand enough so that he dropped the knife into the rumpled blanket. Still clawing at Tommy's throat, Cobb whimpered mindlessly, searching for his knife. They found it simultaneously.

Clawing and struggling, they brought the weapon up between them. Cobb whined aloud, not in fear or weakness, but in obsessive savagery.

It ended abruptly. Afterward, when Tommy tried to reconstruct that last, fearful moment, he could not do it. It all happened too quickly. One moment Cobb was thrusting downward with his knife, in the next, the dwarf was impaled upon its blade.

Cobb lunged up backward. The breath burst from him. With both hands he clutched at the knife sunk hasp-deep into his solar plexus. He was already too weak to jerk it free. He fell back across the bed and they could not even hear him breathe again. He was dead.

"I'll light a candle," Lily whispered in the darkness.

Tommy got up from the sagging matress, moving woodenly in the wan candlelight.

Lily stood as if stunned, with a long vesta still burning in her fingers. Her gaze was fixed on the body on the bed. Cobb still clutched at the knife hasp with both hands. His eyes were wide and staring in death. She seemed unable to pull her eyes away from the dead dwarf.

Tommy stared at the octoroon girl. He blew out the vesta in her hand. Sick at his stomach, he dressed quickly and yet stiffly, as if he were unable to hurry even though all he wanted was to escape this place.

Standing beside the bed, between Lily and the dead man, Tommy pulled on his stockings, trousers, and boots. He shrugged into his shirt, buttoned it and stuffed it in under his belt. Then he recovered the poke of gold eagles and stood looking at them for a moment before he took up his jacket.

"Where are you goin', Massa?" Lily said in a low dead voice.

"I'm getting out of here,' Tommy said, "while I'm still breathing."

"Take me with you, Mastuh. Please, suh."

Tommy winced. "But I've just—killed your half brother."

Lily caught her breath. Her face was ashen. She nodded. "Yes, Mastuh, reckons Mastuh Junior was my own half brother—us havin' the same paw an' all. . . ." Her voice quickened. "But Ah wasn't nevah no way family with Mastuh Hobart and Mastuh Junior. No way. I was they slave—nigger. And that Mastuh Junior was a total devil. . . . I hated him—and feared and despised him. And he'uns did sell me to you, Massa. He did . . . And you may of kilt Mastuh Junior, suh, but I helped you. I cotched his arm."

Tommy nodded. "Yes . . . You saved my life."

Tommy watched the octoroon girl slip her sacklike dress down over her head. He gathered up his own belongings. He said, "If you are going to get your clothes and things, get them. Quickly and quietly."

"I ready to go with you, Mastuh,' Lily said. "This dress all I owns."

He nodded. He blew out the candle. He closed his hand on Lily's elbow and propelled her beside him through the darkness.

He tried to pull the corridor door open quietly, but Lily whispered, "Don't needs to worry 'bout Mastuh Hobart, suh. He drink hisself total unconscious ever' blessed night."

Tommy exhaled heavily, feeling as if he had not breathed in ten minutes at least. With Lily hurrying light-footedly ahead of him, they went along the corridor to the kitchen. They heard Hobart Cobb's helpless snoring. This sound speeded

their steps. They crossed the kitchen and went out into the backyard. The hound came lunging from beneath the rear steps, but the animal sniffed at Lily's legs and did not bark.

Breathing through his mouth as though he'd run a footrace, Tommy strode across the yard to the lean-to barn, with Lily running at his side to keep pace.

Moving as swiftly and silently as possible, Tommy hitched his horse between the carriage shafts. He swung Lily up into the boot and got in beside her. Taking up the reins, he slapped them across the rump of his horse.

He held his breath as the buggy rattled across the rutted yard. He had not realized the little carriage made so much noise. Beside him, Lily sat straight, a strange, expectant smile lighting her face.

As they went around the side of the old house, the front door slammed. Hobart Cobb ran out on the sagging veranda. He wore only his trousers, one suspender strap across his shoulder. His hair stood wildly about his oversized head. He ran out to the end of the porch and grabbed at the upright. He stood there yelling after them. "Junior! That you, Junior?"

They could still hear Hobart Cobb's drunken, raging voice ringing in the darkness when they reached the roadway. Tommy turned the buggy west on the narrow trace, cracking his whip over his fast-moving horse. Lily sat breathless, clinging to his arm.

VII

Tommy didn't allow the galloping horse to slow until lather foamed gray and feathered about its mouth.

Lily touched his arm, voice troubled. "You kills the hoss, Mastuh, an' we nevah gits to New Awleans."

He glanced at her in the chilled darkness. "If Hobart Cobb kills *us* we won't get to New Orleans, either." He slowed the sweated animal. "It's a cold night. Damp. Horse won't suffer workin' up a sweat—"

"Lawsy Gawd, Mastuh," Lily gasped. "Mastuh, you is bleedin' like a stuck pig."

Tommy shrugged. "Junior's going-away present."

"We got to fix it."

He laughed. "Sure. Fix it. Out here in the pig tracks?" He shook his head. "It'll be all right until we can find a doctor."

"Where-at you hopin' to find any doctor out here, Mastuh?" She closed her hand on his wrist. "Your arm's all bleedy. . . . Keep up like this here an' you bleeds to death." She pressed closer, pleading. "Please, Mastuh, let me remedy it."

Swearing under his breath, he wheeled the horse off the weed-grown trail into the covered, cavelike darkness of a thick-grown copse of loblolly pines. The wagon rattled, bumped, and jostled Lily against him. Her uptilted young breasts impaled him and he became heatedly aware of her nearness, whether he wanted to or not. She clung to him as they bumped and clattered into the hammock. One slender hand dug into the flesh high on his inner thigh. He tried to ignore the charged heat flaring out from her gripping fingers. He even tried to tell himself she wasn't aware of what she was doing to him.

When he halted the horse and quieted it in the dark glen, he said, "I best rub him down, way he's sweated in this cold."

"That hoss can wait, Mastuh, till I fix yo' arm. Please. You gits yo' death of blood pizen. What I goin' to do?"

"You are anxious to get to New Orleans, aren't you?"

She only stared at him for a full breath, telling him clearly and without words that she was anxious to be in his arms again and, at the moment, wanted nothing more. Everything she was, ever would be, everything she desired on this sad earth was revealed in her exquisite and dainty face and in her black, liquid, and vulnerable young eyes. He winced. He didn't want to see this.

He drew a deep breath and held it until his chest ached. Mother of Mary, but she was beautiful. A beautiful child. But with the hot memories that swarmed in his mind, it didn't help any to tell himself this, either.

In this deep, smoky darkness, she was like some golden icon. She looked as if her beauty and native purity and chastity were part of her, deep inside her where the Cobb brothers' cruelty and misuse could never mar it. She looked untouched, even when he knew better. And her slender, reedlike, willowy body wasn't nearly complete. God knew how devastating her beauty would be in a few years. It was upsetting right now, when his mind ought to be on a hundred other things.

He tried to concentrate on the knife wound, on the sound of pursuit behind them, their quickest route out of this place. But despite himself he was roused by her fragile, young-girl beauty, as well as by that persistent and unshakable memory of the way he'd possessed her back there in that foul Cobb sty: the way she'd opened her eyes and her body and her soul to him, her whole writhing body assuring him she was his *slave*, in every mind-boggling way that word connotated. . . .

He forced himself to go on sitting silently. He heard Lily stir from beside him, his body faintly chilled when she went away. She leapt lightly down from the boot. "I gits somethin' to fix that cut and stanch thet bleedin'. Might be you could find a clean cloth in your tote bag."

He turned on the buggy seat and found an undershirt. He closed the bag and dropped the garment onto the boot beside him.

Lily levered herself lithely up to the seat beside him. He stared at the glob of mud in her left hand and the ball of spiderwebbing strands in her right.

"My God. Where'd you find this stuff?"

"Spiderwebs easy to find, Mastuh. If you knows where to look."

"In the dark? After a heavy rain?"

"Spiders knows where to spin they webs, Mastuh. 'Specially in a pine hammock."

Lily bent over his bared, bloody arm. Carefully she laced the skeins of spiderwebbing along the cut. The strands were quickly soaked with blood, but by the time she had spread the mud over the length of the gash, bleeding was stanched. She wrapped it all gently and expertly with his undershirt and tied a quick, effective knot, as if she were tying off her knitting. "Poultice," was all she said in a shy, half-swallowed voice. He felt her trembling, but she did not move away.

"I'll see to the horse," he said in a taut voice that he barely recognized as his own.

He heard Lily catch her breath, but before she could protest, he swung down, found an aged, smelly horse blanket in the littered tonneau of the buggy. He took a long time drying and stroking the horse, rubbing it down. Lily remained unmoving on the boot seat.

He returned to the side of the buggy and stood looking up at her. "We ought to get on down the road."

"Yes, Mastuh."

"Cobb's likely on our trail by now."

"Yes, Mastuh."

"I not only stole the slave he never intended to let go, I killed his brother."

"Like you say, Mastuh."

"We can't stop like this. We can't waste time like this."

"Like you say, Mastuh."

"Damn it, Lily. I know what's on your mind. Hell, I know what's on *my* mind."

"Ain't said nuthin', Mastuh."

"Don't have to *say* anything, Lily . . . Not out loud . . . anyhow, damn it, we just can't do—that—anymore."

"Whatever you say, Mastuh."

"Damn it, Lily. That's it. I *am* your master. . . . You are my slave."

"That's what I wants to be, Mastuh. Your slave."

He laughed helplessly. "I don't think we're talking about the same thing, Lily. . . ."

"I yo' slave, Mastuh."

"Well, that just can't be."

"Don't other white gen'mun have slave girls to—to wait on them an' all, Mastuh?"

"Sure they do. Thousands of them. All of them who can—all who can afford it and get away with it, I reckon. But I'm not one of them. I don't ever mean to be. . . ."

"I hears you, Mastuh."

"I know you hear me. But do you know what I'm talking about? We can't risk getting killed."

"I do whatever you say, Mastuh."

"All right. I say we get to New Orleans as fast as this horse will travel."

Lily nodded, remaining stiff and rigid and chilled on the buggy seat. "I wants only to go wheah-at you go. . . . That's all I wants. I belongs to you an' that's what I wants. That's all I wants."

Drawing in a deep breath, he swung up to the boot beside her.

For a moment neither of them spoke. Lily sat primly beside him, looking forlorn and bereft and miserable in her sack dress. She stared straight ahead. It was as if she'd forgotten to breathe.

Tommy glanced at her from the corner of his eye. Oh, sweet Jesus. Wasn't it rough enough to have a homicidal dwarf named Hobart Cobb on his trail, to be running for his life in the unknown, almost unmarked backcountry of Alabama? Why must he be burdened with this sensual, voluptous octoroon girl with one desire in her brain, and with his own mindless, rabid, ravenous craving for her that was not going to be stilled—and which she could enflame with a glance from those unshielded, artless black eyes? Her mind wasn't cluttered with a varnish of puritanical morality, right and wrong. Sex was as natural as a smile in expressing emotions for this unspoiled little creature. Now the *heat* of desire emanated from her like a smoky musk, and God knew she was breathtakingly desirable.

But it was not only simply the fact that Lily was his slave

that stopped him. God knew, there was much more. When he looked at her—and as long as he looked upon her from now on—she would remind him of Junior Cobb, of Hobart Cobb, of the savage way Junior died. He wanted to escape *her* and everything she recalled to his mind. But even as he thought this, she lured him, like some golden-fleshed succubus, and he could not resist her fresh young beauty, though he hated her for it and hated himself more.

He took up the reins and tried not to look at Lily at all. She was as tormenting as she herself was tormented, with craving.

"I goes all crazy and hot with wantin', Mastuh. . . all my life I has dreamed somebody would come and take me away from the Cobbs—just never dreamed it be nobody beautiful like you what would come along. I gets the need. Like a terrible itch. I sorry, Mastuh. I tries to behave like you wants me to."

Tommy sucked in a deep breath. He wrapped the lines about the whip socket, taking his time, feeling blood pounding in his temples and hunger gnawing in his loins. What the hell? She was his slave. Sure, delay right now put their lives on the line. Well, dying one way was as final as another, and this looked like the best way of all to go.

He took up the blanket that Lily had been using to cover herself against the night chill. He threw it out upon the pine needles beside the carriage.

He vaulted out of the buggy and swung Lily up in his arms. He laughed because by the time he laid her down upon the blanket, Lily had writhed free of that sack dress, slipping it over her head and tossing it behind her. He knelt beside her and closed his lips over her uptilted, firm young breast, sucking. Lily shivered in exquisite agony. She lay back upon the itchy blanket, but she was unconscious of its prickling roughness, its smell of old sweat. Her entire body reacted to his mouth on her nipple and the excitement radiating outward so that her hips undulated involuntarily.

He held her against him in a fierce embrace, and she locked her ankles about his waist. When he drove himself to her he felt as if he were being blasted out of time and space and reason, and as though they were being hurtled into some wild and savage realm.

No sense of time or reality or of the cold night existed in

the world around them. She cried out mindlessly, words he'd never heard before, sounds without meaning. He covered her fevered lips with his mouth and she opened it wide to the probing of his tongue.

Lily writhed, thrusting herself closer against him.

Her senses reeling, she clung to him. The pine hammock wheeled and spun around her. She was aware of nothing except the exquisite and agonizing sweetness of unbearable delight.

They sagged and lay locked together. She breathed helplessly, exhausted. She wanted nothing more than to remain locked in his embrace like this forever. She was yanked coldly down from the heights by his voice. "This is the last time. Do you understand? We've got to stop doing this. There is only one thing that's important from this moment, and that's getting back to New Orleans. Alive."

Lily sighed emptily. "Like you say, Mastuh."

It was almost daylight when Tommy drove the buggy cautiously out of the pine copse to the rutted trace west. He held his breath, looking both ways along the road. He drove tautly, glancing frequently over his shoulder. The world turned bright cerise around them, the dawn boiling up from the creeks and gulleys and wild country. He turned to speak to Lily, but she was asleep, sagged against his shoulder. She looked so young and forlorn and abandoned in that faded cotton shift. A wave of tenderness flooded over him. He warned himself against feeling anything for this slave girl. He gently lowered her until her dark head rested upon his leg. She did not stir.

VIII

It was such an eternal, haunted drive, a journey through alien, unknown backcountry. Checking constantly across his shoulder, Tommy let the horse plod along rutted lanes which faded at times into formless paths. He held the reins tautly, with Lily sleeping with her head in his lap and hackles prickling the nape of his neck. The trail slithered aimlessly through silent, lush forests where every elderberry clump provided shelter for an ambusher. And he was not deceived by the unbroken quiet; it was a taut, waiting kind of stillness. He stayed off the traveled highroad when he could. Hobart Cobb could have passed their hiding place last night; the little man might be waiting to trap them at any turn.

The sun rose, baking his shoulders but not melting the chill at the nape of his neck. He tried to breathe naturally, to think rationally, and to think ahead, but he found himself holding his breath for long moments. The tiresome miles stretched empty and humid and silent across the swamplands. His eyes ached and burned with fatigue.

Lily awoke just before noon, famished. "I hungry and I thirsty, Mastuh."

"Sorry. There's nothing to eat. We may come to a village soon. But even then, we've got to be careful. . . . Your brother Hobart may well be up there ahead of us."

She stiffened. "Mister Hobart ain't my brother. I got nobody." She sighed. "Nobody but you." She slid closer. "I yo' slave."

He laughed in exasperation. "Don't start that."

"I jus' want you to know, Mastah." She kept those olive-black eyes averted. "I here. I yo' slave. To do anything you want."

"Oh, I know you're here, all right. And I know what's on your one-track mind. But you can forget it. We're not stopping between here and New Orleans."

Lily nodded. She did not speak. They rode almost a mile in brittle silence. She moved away from him. He glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. She looked so young, so forlorn and abandoned he wanted to take her in his arms and reassure her, but he knew better. He knew where that led; he'd been down that path.

"I've hated white men. White people. All my life." Lily spoke almost under her breath, as if talking to herself, mulling it over.

Tommy turned and peered at her, brow tilted.

Her black eyes struck against his defiantly. "That's right. I have. Long as I can remember. Only white people I ever knew made me hate them—and all other white people, too. . . . They never let me forgit I'm black. Like I don't know it. Like I got to be reminded. A Negress. As if that's a dirty word of some kind . . . I know—according to white man's law, a Negro is—an animal. An animal that can talk . . . Beneath them. Like mud under their boots . . . Don't you fret, Mastuh. I'll learn to hate you, too—like I hated Junior and Mister Hobart—like I hate all white people."

He stared at her a moment, shocked at her implacable, cold passion. Then he shrugged and laughed. "Good. You go on hating me—"

"Never no way said I hated you. Not yet . . . Said I'd learn to."

"Good. You just sit there and practice."

When they topped a knoll they saw a village like something littered in ugly patches across the glen below. Tommy smiled. "We'll get some food—take it with us and eat it on the way."

She didn't speak. She didn't even appear to hear him. He laughed. "What's the matter? You practicing your hatred?"

"I tryin' to be what you want me to be, Mastuh."

* * *

He drove the buggy warily into the sunstruck settlement. A few ugly, unpainted, mildewed, and decrepit houses, outhouses, barns, and a tavern-general store sprawled in the stillness. He pulled his vehicle in before the shaded veranda of the tavern shop, allowing his horse to drink at the public trough. Other horses and carriages lined the hitch rail. Rain puddles glistened like scars in the rutted street.

He was aware of the odd, hostile staring of the citizenry. Then he realized: Few white men in this year of Our Lord 1825 rode with black women on the seat beside them. He hadn't owned slaves long enough to learn what most of these people were born knowing: The place for a black servant, male or female, was in the narrow tonneau, legs dangling over the rear board. His jaw tightened. The hell with them.

He entered the saffron-hazed tavern, a large, dank, ale-smelling room with double doors opening upon a well-stocked general store. He had a quick beer and then bought rat cheese, soda crackers, jellied, sugarcoated candies, tins of preserved peaches and dried apples, a loaf of freshly baked bread. Then he selected coffee, flour, beans, and sorghum. As he moved through the crowded aisles, shafts of high-windowed sunlight rimming him, the proprietor watched him unblinkingly. The intensity of the thin, red-faced man's gaze was like the sting of army ants on Tommy's sweated flesh. He straightened his shoulders, tilted his head slightly. The hell with this character, too.

The lean man braced himself on his use-slicked counter, watching Tommy narrowly. "Your name by any chance Levison? . . . No. Lavedon? Something like that?"

Tommy stiffened, keeping his voice casual. "Why?"

The man continued to peer at him without blinking those sun-faded blue eyes. "From New Awleans, be you? On your way back home from over in Charleston, South Carolina?"

Tommy stared at the grocer, feeling as if the plank flooring was insubstantial under his boots.

The man grinned coldly. "If that be your name, was a man in here lookin' for you. Strange little fellow. Wild hair. Wild eyes. Big head. Flintlock gun taller'n him . . . Name of Cobb—Hobart Cobb . . . Name mean anythin' to you?"

Tommy sucked in a deep breath. He didn't answer.

The grocer shrugged, still watching him warily. "If you be this here fellow, Cobb says he's lookin' for you. . . . Claims you stole a female house slave of his'n."

Carrying the poke of supplies, Tommy walked out to the carriage, trying not to seemed rushed. He found the buggy surrounded by gaping women, young men, teenagers, and wide-eyed children.

The all stared fascinated up at Lily, who sat unmoving on the boot, like Marie Antoinette in her tumbrel on the way to the guillotine.

Tommy pushed his way through the ring of people and placed the poke on the seat beside Lily. A teenaged youth said, squinting up at her, "She's black, ain't she, Mister?"

Tommy glanced at the boy and swung up onto the carriage boot. Lily was trembling, but her chin was tilted and she kept her head high, her gaze forward fixed on some far distance. He took up the buggy whip.

A woman called, "You mean you let a black slave ride on the same seat with you, Mister?"

Tommy peered out over the taut, upturned faces. "Sometimes I do," he said. He slapped the reins and cracked the buggy whip. People stepped back out of the way as he headed the vehicle west out of town.

He kept the horse moving swiftly. He placed his loaded gun on the boot seat between them. Lily rummaged excitedly through the poke. She found the candies and cried out delightedly.

"I hope you can laugh like that when Brother Hobart gets us." He exhaled heavily, as though he had not breathed since he left the store. "Brother Hobart passed us last night. He was in that town—asking for us."

Lily paused, the green jellied candy on her lips. She chewed it, at first distractedly and then ravenously. Swallowing she said, "I sorry I delayed you back there last night, Mastuh. I know you didn't want to stop."

"Damn you," he said, watching her plop another candy into her mouth. "Can't you stop eating for one minute?"

She licked her tongue across her lips. "I mighty hungry, Mastuh. Doin' what we did—back there—much as we did—makes me mighty hungry."

He stared at her. "I know what's happened is not your fault. . . . Takes two to have the kind of party we had back there. I'm not blaming you. But we've got Brother Hobart *ahead* of us now. Waiting. Hiding. God knows where. Our only hope is that he still thinks he's *chasing* us. But when he realizes nobody has seen us—he'll know he's got us cut off."

She chewed on the candy contentedly. "You smarter than Mister Hobart, Mastuh. . . . Don't you want a candy?"

"Sure . . . what the hell . . . The condemned man ate a hearty lunch—of sugar candy, rat cheese, and panic. What the hell. You won't care if Brother Hobart and I kill each other off. White people killing each other. That ought to make you happy."

"I've dreamed of it."

At the first crossroads, Tommy turned his carriage south. This road was even rougher, less traveled than the trace west, but it somehow seemed to offer temporary sanctuary, at least. Lily sagged beside him as if she were without a care in the world.

He did not stop that night at dusk. He made only brief rest stops for the horse. He followed a circuitous route, but he reasoned that if Cobb followed the main trail west, he had bought a little time. He wanted to put as many miles as possible between himself and the vengeful dwarf.

"If'n Mister Hobart goin' to find you, Mastuh, he find you in New Awleans, won't he?"

"Thanks for the vote of confidence. This is Hobart's country. New Orleans is mine. He might find me, but it won't be as easy."

"All you white people do look alike," she agreed.

He did not answer, but kept his gaze on the trace. It was desperately slow going in the darkness, the horse picking its way over the ill-marked lane. At a creek, he stopped and watered the horse.

He sat tense, listening for hoofbeats on their back trail.

There was only the fretted silences of the swamps, the remote scream of a panther, the sudden panic of flushed birds. The whole world was a place of pursuit, killing, death.

They drove in silence along the silent night trail toward Biloxi. Lily curled on the seat under the blanket and slept with her head in his lap. Tommy sagged: exhausted, craving sleep, afraid to sleep or to relax for an instant.

Once Lily spoke from where she lay with her head in his lap. "You all sure you know where-at we're goin', Mastuh?"

Drowning in his own agony of fatigue, Tommy swore. "What the hell you care?"

"If'n we lost, we may travel in a circle and come on to Mister Hobart."

"That's the chance you take, riding with me. . . . You said you had one wish, Lily: to go where I go. To serve me. To be my slave. So don't ask so many questions."

"Mister Hobart," she said in a musing tone. "He sly. Like a weasel."

He shrugged his shoulders. "So. Hobart and I kill each other. You are free. I'll stipulate that. Manumission upon my death. Freedom, Lily."

"I likes to be free, all right. But not ifn' you're dead, Mastuh."

"Why, thank you, Lily. But don't tell me you're beginning to *like* white people?"

"No, Mastuh. Still hate 'em all . . . Most all of them." She burrowed her head deeper into his lap.

Tommy slumped on the seat, more asleep than awake. As if in a nightmare, he heard the pounding of racing hooves in the night behind him.

He straightened, his senses reeling. Sure enough, someone raced a horse on the back trail. Tommy tightened his grip on the reins, slowing and then stopping the tired horse. He listened, holding his breath.

There was only silence. It was if he had dreamed the sounds, like the shredded fabric of a nightmare, persistent wisps of fear's illusion. Silence thickened and settled heavily, like a shroud, dangerous and threatening. He could see nothing in the mists across the trace.

Lily lifted her head slightly, asking sleepily what was wrong. He only clamped his palm over her mouth, shaking his head, warning her to silence. He saw the fear, like some molten poison, seep into her eyes, leaving her stricken. Why not, she knew Brother Hobart a hell of a lot better than he did.

Warily he slapped the reins and the horse plodded forward again. He turned often, checking across his shoulder, going tense at sudden and unexplained noises in the underbrush. When he stopped, he always found only the empty trail stretching shadowed and forsaken behind them.

But he was no longer deceived. He no longer found any security in darkness or in running. Hobart Cobb was back there, pursuing them with deadly stealth, with the cunning of a weasel, relentless and driven and consumed by hatred, on their trail.

He tried a dozen times to trick his pursuer. He pulled off the trail and waited, concealed in underbrush. He hid in a pine copse, armed with his gun, and sent Lily ahead, driving the buggy. Mosquitoes and deerflies feasted on him. Reptiles slithered in the mulch of leaves and brush. But he caught no glimpse of Cobb. He heard no hoofbeats. Suddenly he was afraid that Cobb had gotten ahead of them and might by now have captured Lily and the carriage. He lunged out of the pines and ran along the road until he overtook her. When he was in the buggy again, he swore he could discern that telltale throb of hooves behind him. He sweated. Cobb was back there, all right—tracking them, watching, choosing his moment to strike. Cobb had a plan, and was waiting only for the precise instant to attack.

Tommy shivered. The rising morning sun brought a damply oppressive heat. Sweat marbled at his armpits and trickled like ice water along his ribs. Lily was as tense. "Mastuh," she whispered. "I hear something back there."

He nodded. He slowed the horse for the hundredth time and they sat taut in the sweated stillness. It was if their own minds played tricks on them now. They heard horses' hooves, but found no trace of animal or rider or hoofprint.

Tommy slapped the reins, sending his horse forward, trotting. "Why don't you get out and go back?" he said once. "If you go back to him he may let you live."

The girl shuddered. "I rather be dead than go back," she said. "No. There be just one thing I wish . . . Wish I had that paper—sayin' you set me free."

He laughed at her. "I'm not dead yet."

She nodded. "I know that, Mastuh. . . . I was just thinkin'. Case Mister Hobart gets to us first."

He laughed again. "You go to hell."

"I been in hell, Mastuh," Lily said. "I was born in hell. I been in hell all my life."

IX

They drove swiftly into the town limits of New Orleans. Tommy kept glancing over his shoulder as though the devil were on his tail. At the first glimpse of the Crescent City, he felt as if he'd won a minor victory. He'd not yet escaped the obsessed little man stalking him, but he had reached his own terrain. It would be harder for a backwoodsman to trace him in this crowded city; there were fewer chances for ambush. Cobb had trailed them with diabolical cleverness. Tommy had spent those eternal days and nights afraid to sleep, as watchful and tense as if he ran through the strange labyrinths of unending nightmare. There was still the chance that Cobb would strike, but Tommy felt safer among other, ordinary people. Lily sat, taut, fascinated. When he spoke to her, she nodded, licked her tongue across her lips, and her eyes brightened, but she did not speak. Enchantment animated her face. She'd never dreamed, hoped, or fantasized that she would ever lay eyes on this magic and exotic city. New Orleans was like another planet to people in backcountry Alabama. She stared in wonder. Nothing had prepared her for the dreamlike unreality of the ancient city coagulated along a twisting river in bayou lowlands. The town burst abruptly into view in all its bustle and excitement and tamped-down violences. It was many cities, really—the new divided from the old French and Spanish quarters by the wide Esplanade. Shell-paved streets were crowded, busy with more people than Lily had imagined could gather in one place, a giant, sun-broiled melting pot. All roads led to turns in the river where watercraft from all the alien ports of the earth gathered,

promising newer and more incredible mysteries beyond the bayous.

Piers stretched as far as one could see, piled high with goods from remotest ports. Ships of every registry, shape, and tonnage lay at anchor, sometimes three abreast. Along the levees, shallow draft boats gathered like mendicants around the great oceangoing vessels. Bare-chested men worked loading, unloading, stacking barrels of rum and sorghum, coffee, naval stores, and lumber on every open inch of quay planking. A babel of languages assaulted her ears. Everywhere people rushed and yet none seemed hurried. Men and women of every nationality and every hue paused to exchange laughter, words, or kisses.

Lily caught her breath. "Look at all the black folks," she whispered, half to herself. "A-laughin', talkin', an' walkin' free."

Tommy laughed. "They're freedmen of color, Lily. That's what you'll be—if Brother Hobart overtakes us."

She nodded, but did not speak, fascinated by the way these black people reveled in their freedom, enslaved by no man. Negroes laughed and talked and strode the streets in a way unknown anywhere else south of the Mason-Dixon line. Freed blacks gadded, promenading as if they owned those shell-paved streets. All seemed engaged in some careless commerce: They hawked fish or fresh flowers, or hot crabs or boiled peanuts. There were peddlers, pimps, prostitutes, pickpockets, and children performing along the wooden banquettes for tossed pennies.

"Nevah saw nothin' like this." Lily shook her head. "Feels like I've walked into heaven."

With difficulty, Tommy threaded the buggy through the tanglings of traffic and unheeding pedestrians. Stunned, Lily swiveled her head, wanting to see every marvel at once. Tommy maneuvered the vehicle around a sharp, narrow corner and along a walled street of the Vieux Carre. Here Lily found an entirely new world, an ancient, yet ageless place of open upper balconies edged in wrought-iron latticework, of flowered walls and hidden courtyards bright with crepe myrtle, jacaranda, oleander, and palms unlike anything she'd ever seen before. Willow limbs spilled green over the high con-

crete enclosures, and through everything spread the smells of jasmine, magnolia, and carnations.

Tommy pulled the carriage into the hitching post outside a small and chic boutique. Around them rose the raucous cries of peddlers, the clatter of carriage wheels on cobbled streets, the wild laughter of unseen revelers.

Lily pulled her gaze from the delights on all sides. "Why we stoppin' here, Mastuh?"

He laughed. "If you're going to be worth a damn as a lady's body slave, Lily, you've got to learn to stop asking so damn many questions."

The girl nodded contritely and leapt down from the boot to the wooden walkway and followed Tommy across it. He pushed open the boutique door and a bell tinkled somewhere in the interior of the dimly lit shop.

A woman, prim and elegantly, if simply, attired, came along the racks of displayed dresses and undergarments. At first she smiled, welcoming Tommy, but when she saw the octoroon girl at his heels, she shook her pink-haired head. "Sorry, M'sieu," she said. "I'm afraid we do not serve black women in this shop."

"I'm buying the dress," Tommy said. "And I assure you, I'm white."

"I don't mean to be rude, sir. But we would soon lose all our genteel trade if word got around that we even allowed black women into our store. I'm sure you can understand that?"

"We want to buy one dress," Tommy said. "Nice but simple. I need your expertise. We'll get out as quickly as we can."

The woman went on shaking her head, looking as if she tasted something unpleasant. "I'm sorry, sir. We cannot serve you. Perhaps if you went to one of the open shops near Congo Square."

"We need your help," Tommy persisted.

"I'm afraid, sir, we have nothing suitable for a nigger woman."

Tommy stiffened but went on smiling. "Maybe when you understand," he suggested.

"I'm afraid, sir, there's nothing to understand. Our shop is

quite exclusive, you see. We serve only the most genteel of white ladies."

"This girl is to be the wedding gift to the most genteel young white lady of St. Charles Avenue," Tommy said. "Perhaps you know her. Miss Gale Michel."

"Of course. One of our finest families."

"Yes. That's why I've come to you. To ask you to make an exception this one time. The slave's name is Lily. As I say, she's a wedding present for Miss Gale Michel. She must look her best. As you can see, there's a lot to be done. And, of course, price is no object."

The woman hesitated only a breath longer. Then she went to the front of the store and locked the front door. She looked down her nose at Tommy. "If you'd care to leave the girl here with me, I'll see that she is—cleaned up—and suitably attired as a lady's maid."

"That would be most kind," Tommy said.

X

Tommy drove the cleaned and spruced-up carriage through late afternoon traffic toward St. Charles Avenue. His heart played painfully pleasant tricks on him, beating arrythmically, sinking oddly, or seeming not to beat at all.

This had been a long, interminable day. He should have been exhausted, but he was not. He was bouyed up by his anticipation, exhilarated by the magic of his return. St. Charles had never looked more elegant. A perfect setting for Gale's perfection. Whatever this Eden had cost in human suffering and sacrifice, it was worth it.

Lily sat straight and silent on the boot beside him. He hardly recognized her. He'd left her with the pink-haired woman in the Royal Street boutique and had driven to the swank St. Louis Hotel. He'd entrusted horse and buggy to hotel grooms with orders to feed, curry, and stall the animal, and polish the travel-stained vehicle. In the quiet and sedately elegant lobby, he'd signed the register, engaging a room overlooking the hotel gardens and St. Louis Street. The clerk asked if he had body slaves with him—an entirely ordinary question at that fashionable inn. From old habit, Tommy almost said no, then he remembered Lily who was being beautified in the Vieux Carre boutique. "A young woman slave," he said.

No hesitation, surprise, or shock showed in the clerk's face. This worthy had seen everything in this old hotel's slave-owning clientele. "Would you like a cell in our hotel barracoon, or will she be in your room with you, sir?"

"I'll just keep her in my room," Tommy said in as off-

handed a manner as he could manage, trying to appear as though he'd owned body slaves all his life. He heard himself explaining that the girl was to be a wedding gift. He realized he was talking too much, saying more than was necessary. No explanation was expected or required. He broke off, shrugging, just about to say the girl could sleep at the foot of his bed when he realized the clerk didn't give a damn about their sleeping arrangements, either. New Orleans was one of the most modern and sophisticated cities in the world and prided itself upon its tolerance. The clientele of the St. Louis Hotel was the town's most affluent and powerful, people who lived by their own rules and usually a hitch above the law.

In his well-appointed room, he wrote a note to Gale and despatched it to her by hotel messenger. He bathed in a copper tub in steaming water provided by serving boys. Then he shaved and dressed carefully. Lily awaited him in rigid silence at the boutique. She wore a simple cotton frock with modest round bodice, puffed short sleeves, its printed fabric flowing from tight-cinched waist. New, but sensible shoes winked from the hem of her dress. She'd been scrubbed, brushed, and primped until her young flesh glowed. Only her dark eyes were dull, as if a light had been extinguished inside them.

"Miss Gale Michel should be most proud to receive this girl," the boutique proprietor said. "You could take this wench anywhere now and not be ashamed of her."

Tommy nodded. "You've done a beautiful job."

Lily followed him silently from the shop, as if on her way to the scaffold.

Gale came running out the huge old front door as Tommy halted his carriage outside her father's imposing mansion.

The thick oak door slammed behind her and her heels echoed as she hurried down the wide steps to him.

Tommy leapt down from the buggy and caught her in his arms. She laughed in delight as she crossed the shadowed veranda, and still smiled as she sailed into his arms. The abrupt change in her was so subtle that its chill gripped both of them before he realized that she was not the same anymore.

He held her close. She was even lovelier than when he'd left her. "I'll never let you go again," he vowed.

"Why, off course you won't, darling." But it was as if it cost her an effort even to say these words, as if, after that first burst of excitement at his return, she was distracted and preoccupied, her mind on something else.

He felt chilled, because he knew her and her moods so well; he'd suffered because of them often before. With an effort, he forced himself to laugh and gather her closer in his arms.

He half lifted her from the ground, smiling into her wan face. "I've come home to marry you, Gale."

"Of course you have, honey." She smiled, but she seemed gazing at something far across his shoulder, something lost and gone.

"I'm taking you with me," he said.

Again, that preoccupied smile. She hadn't even listened to his words, but only to the tone of his voice. "Oh, I know we'll be happy, darling."

"That's not what I said. I said I'm taking you away from here with me."

"Oh, I want to be with you, darling. Anywhere."

"You're not listening," he said in well-remembered despair.

She touched his face with her soft fingertips. "Of course I'm listening to you, darling. You said we'd be happy together. And I know we will be."

"I'm going to Haiti," he said, setting her back on her feet. "As soon as we're married. I'm taking you with me."

She stared up at him as if she'd never seen him before. "Haiti? Darling, you must be joking. . . . I couldn't go anywhere now. . . . My parents are so distressed, I couldn't just leave them."

"Distressed? Because you're marrying me?"

"Oh, of course not, darling. I don't pretend they're ecstatic." She laughed in a sad way. "But at least they are reconciled. And they'll love you. Once they know you. As I love you. We've just got to give them a little time, that's all."

She smiled, but looked around in the gathering darkness in that almost frightened way. Suddenly, before he could speak, Gale began to cry softly.

"It's just that everything's all wrong, darling," she said. "That's all. It has nothing to do with you. Except that you

are back now, and you are going to make everything right. I'm just so tired. So hurt. I'll be glad when we're married."

He laughed, and the darkling world lightened around them. Mansions of the wealthy stood like bulwarks around them, securing them inside, in the splendor of her affluent world.

"I've missed you so much," she said sniffling. "I've been so lonely. You do love me still, don't you, Paul? As much as ever?"

There was nothing wrong with Gale's words, or with her tone. It was just as if what she'd said had nothing to do with their love, their marriage, or even this conversation. Her mind seemed to be on something far removed from this place. He watched her closely, deeply troubled.

He refused to surrender to his own despair. He turned and glanced at Lily on the buggy seat. Her face seemed hewn from rigid ivory. He said, "Lily, get down. I want you to meet your new mistress."

Lily stepped down to the ground. Gale watched the girl oddly, her mind brought back to this moment and this place. "Now who in the world is this?" Gale said. Tommy touched Lily's elbow to propel her forward on the drive. She was trembling violently. He caressed her shoulder gently, trying to reassure her.

"Her name is Lily, Gale. I bought her for you. She's my wedding gift to you. She'll have to be trained. But she should be a good body servant for you. She's only fifteen."

"Why, thank you, honey," Gale said. She inspected the slave girl closely. "How thoughtful of you. But I do hope you didn't spend a lot of your money. I have maids, you know. Maybe you could sell her. I do hear that clean house servants are selling at a premium these days."

Tommy frowned. "You don't want her?"

Gale laughed at him. "Why, Paul, honey. You ought to know that a genteel, young white lady just *never* wants a wench as lovely as this girl for a *personal* maid. . . . We're entirely too vain to share our glory with a pretty little octoroon." Gale's face chilled. "There are much better places for her—where she'd be far more appreciated—for her skills."

Tommy winced. "I'm sorry you don't want her."

Gale smiled. "Now I've gone and hurt your feelings, haven't I? And on your first day back home. How thoughtless

and cruel of me. Of course, I want her. You brought her to me and because of that, why, I'll just cherish her."

Gale took Lily by the arm and led her up the steps to the veranda. At the doorway, Gale summoned the butler.

Sick, Tommy watched Lily. She sagged—bereft and lost and terrified. He warned himself to forget the sight. Lily would have a good home here. One hell of a step up from that hovel she'd had with the Cobb brothers.

The butler took Lily's arm. The last Tommy saw of her she was silently resisting, as if she were being dragged to doom instead of into a mansion richer than anything she'd dreamed.

He went slowly up the steps to where Gale awaited him. Her face looked drawn, her eyes haunted by some hurt unknown and unknowable to him. He said, "Somebody has hurt you, Gale. . . . What is it? What's the matter?"

Suddenly she wept, toppling against him. "Why can't I be happy?" she whispered. "Why must I be hurt? You won't hurt me, will you, Paul? We will be married, won't we?"

There was something frantic in her voice. She pressed herself close and let him love her, but when they parted at midnight, nothing was settled between them, and Tommy drove away empty-bellied and confused, stricken with that old dissatisfaction he had taken away with him, and which was waiting when he returned.

XI

Tommy thanked the gods that the St. Louis Hotel was still vibrant with life, brilliant with lights, loud with laughter and movement, and crowded with people when he arrived there a little before one A.M. He had driven slowly back to the Vieux Carre from St. Charles Avenue, confused and troubled, and he dreaded the thought of being alone. Except that the crowds were sparser and even more elegantly attired, it may as well have been noon in the saloon. Men and women laughed together at discreet tables. Men lined the bar in swank evening dress and high hats. He found an isolated spot near the buffet table were elaborate and free hors d'oeuvre were enticingly displayed. He ordered bourbon and water and then sat with the untouched drink in his fist. He had not eaten all day, but after the strange and confusing reunion with Gale, he was not hungry. Subdued sounds from this room and the lobby beyond French doors washed around him, but he felt remote from everybody.

He leaned against the bar, finished off the whiskey, and yawned, still unwilling to risk the dark loneliness of his room.

"Well, M'sieu Lavedon. I see you have returned."

The vaguely familiar voice at his elbow startled him. He was deep in reverie; it was almost as if he were wakened abruptly from sleep.

He turned reluctantly toward the man who was almost pressed in an aggressive way against his right shoulder. The face was dark and savagely scowling. It took a moment, and then he recalled Gale's ex-fiancé. "Vigneaux," he said. "What

are you doing in here? Why aren't you out mugging people in alleys?''

''Very clever,'' Vigneaux said. ''I have been waiting for you. I wish to speak with you.''

''Well, that's too bad, because I've no wish to speak to you.''

''Privately,'' Vigneaux persisted.

''You're an easy man to hate, aren't you?'' Tommy said. ''Does having all the money in the world give you the right to go around making demands on strangers? Of course, you and I aren't really strangers, are we? We met once, didn't we, in a dark alley of your choosing?''

Vigneaux peered at him for a long beat with an look of inexpressible bitterness. Then, with some élan, he turned and spoke to the bartender. He ordered a Sazerac cocktail for himself and whiskey and water for Tommy. ''I'd appreciate it if you'd have the drinks served at that corner table.''

Tommy stared at Vigneaux incredulously. Vigneaux merely held his gaze in a challenging way. Then he turned and crossed the room, going between the tables without looking back. Tommy grinned to himself and then, after a brief delay, followed the Creole to the small table in a remote corner. He told himself he went only because he admired anyone with such obvious and enormous self-confidence.

He sat down, and for a moment he and Vigneaux regarded each other like deadly adversaries across the rich linen tablecloth.

They did not speak until a black waiter in dress suit set their drinks on rich linen napkins before them. The waiter asked if he might bring them delicacies from the buffet, but Vigneaux merely handed him a gold piece and waved him away.

''So Gale sent for you,'' Vigneaux said at last. When Tommy only shrugged, Vigneaux added, ''She swore to me that she would.'' Tommy merely shrugged his shoulders again and Vigneaux asked in a low, deadly tone, ''Why do you think she sent for you?''

''I think it's none of your goddamn business.''

To his surprise, Vigneaux laughed at that, a bitter sound, almost with an underscoring of tears, but laughter nevertheless. ''That's how blind you are, M'sieu. They do say that

none are so blind as they who refuse to see. . . . I assure you, M'sieu, Miss Gale Michel's sending for you concerns no one more than me—perhaps not even you yourself. After all, you're only a poor pawn, even if you are too abstruse to see it."

Tommy sipped at his drink, emptiness spreading at his solar plexus. "Pawn?" He tried to match the Creole's studied calm.

"That's right, M'sieu Lavedon. That's all you have been all along. Did it not appear strange to you that Gale should send for you—so soon after she had rejected you, sent you away, and told you she was going to marry me?"

Tommy shook his head. "No. We had been in love for a long time before I ever even heard of you—and your black thugs in that alley. I figured she had come to her senses, saw that you would not be worth it, even if you were richer than God. Women do change their minds, don't they?"

"Well, I'm afraid I must disillusion you on this matter, M'sieu."

Clearly Vigneaux was consumed with rage and jealousy and hatred. He could behave with outward calm, but inside the man moiled with agonies, his nerves in taut clangor. Vigneaux was near the edge. But on the other hand, from what Tommy had seen of him, perhaps this was the fellow's natural state. Obviously he was a man unaccustomed to being denied any of the prizes of this world's bazaar. When he wanted something he took it, and no one ever stood against him.

"Miss Michel is a beautiful girl," Vigneaux said with no particular emphasis. "Yes. Lovely. The most beautiful in the bayou country. If she were less than the very *creme*, I myself would have no interest in her. I cannot even believe she would seriously consider wasting her beauty and elegance on the likes of you."

"Evidently she does, Vigneaux."

"Does she? Or is she only a very spoiled young woman, of whims? I tell you, despite my outrage at her behavior, I am sorry for her. Quite sorry for her."

Tommy moved to stand up. "If that's your message, I shall certainly deliver it."

"Sit down," Vigneaux whispered, with such intensity that

the words crackled in the late night stillness. People glanced toward them from as far away as across the room.

Tommy laughed at him. "People are beginning to stare, Vigneaux. Surely you don't want that?"

"I have no interest in what stupid people think or do, M'sieu. I am speaking for the best interest of both of us. Perhaps yours, even more than mine."

"Don't worry about me so much, Vigneaux. I'm a big boy."

Vigneaux laughed tautly. "I'm sure you think you are. Just as I am sure you have convinced yourself that Gale Michel truly loves you and sent for you because she loves you."

Tommy stared at Vigneaux. He had come away from Gale tonight with a terrible sense of insufficiency gnawing at him. Perhaps at least Vigneaux might supply answers. He waited coldly, his fists knotted between his legs.

"I tell you in all honesty, M'sieu. If Gale Michel does marry you, and I cannot believe she will, it has nothing to do with whether she loves you or not. If she marries you, it will be done only to avenge herself upon me."

Tommy shrugged. "I'll drink to that. Just so she marries me, I don't care why."

"Then you are even a bigger fool than I thought. Would you want a woman who has used you only to spite another?"

"Why do you think yourself so wonderful that a woman might love only you? As far as I can see, you have nothing but money."

"I assure you, M'sieu. I have more. Much more. Social position. One of the finest family names in this state. I am a gentleman, not a rootless, wandering, and unemployed rogue. I could make Gale happy. I could give her everything she could ever want."

Tommy grinned coldly. "That sounds great, Vigneaux. But if you hold all the aces, why did Gale send for me, why is she marrying old rootless me, after all?"

"If you are so blind, if you have been back in New Orleans a full day without hearing the gossip, then I shall inform you. She called you back because the week before our wedding, I found her in bed with—with a nobody."

Tommy came forward in his chair. "I warn you, Vigneaux—"

"It won't cost you anything to hear the rest of the truth.

And I speak only the truth, as the Mother of God is my witness. Outraged, I denounced her. I told her the truth about herself. She is a slut. Oh, rich and lovely and protected, but a slut. Meeting men in dark corners, in hideaways, and pretending such purity."

"I think you've said enough."

Vigneaux raised his trembling left hand in a staying gesture. "Oh, there's not much more. She called off the wedding—"

"I wonder why in the world she would have done a thing like that?" Tommy said in tired irony.

"I told her I was willing to marry her. There was too much involved. My good name. The disgrace if the scandal got out about her flagrant infidelity. But she refused. Hysterically refused."

"Well, let's not fault her for *how* she escaped you. Let's drink only to the fact that she did."

Now Vigneaux laughed again in that cold and savage way. "Oh, it is better than that. She swore she would get even with me. She'd save her own reputation, while dragging my good name through the mud by marrying the one man most inimical to me—a nobody, an upstart law clerk. That's why she is marrying you, M'sieu. And that is the only reason. She knew she could reel you in at will. You'd do anything, even come running six hundred miles to her. It had to be you, because she knew no decent, self-respecting man in New Orleans would touch her after I was through with her. But you weren't here. You knew nothing about it. Even now you sit there, full of rage, doubting me."

For a moment, Tommy did not speak. He had his answers. Gale had been preoccupied, distracted because she had not known whether he had heard the gossip that gushed through the town like open sewage. He managed to finish off the drink, keep it on his stomach, and move to stand up. "You've said enough, Vigneaux."

"I have spoken only the truth. The sad and ugly truth. I've spoken to show you what Miss Gale Michel really is, what you will have to live with if you marry her and try to live in New Orleans."

"What you've shown me is what you are, an evil-minded son of a bitch, willing to ruin a woman who won't marry him

after he calls her a slut to her face. You're a son of a bitch, Vigneaux. Rich as God maybe, but still a son of a bitch."

Gasping, Vigneaux pushed back in his chair. He stood up and gripped his calfskin gloves in his fist, ready to backhand Tommy across the face.

Tommy faced him coldly. "Don't do it, Vigneaux. You've got everybody in the place looking at us. But you can't make me meet you under some stupid dueling oak. You said it yourself, old cock. I'm no rich and noble gentleman like you. You hit me with those gloves and I'll drive your balls up between your teeth this time . . . and right here and now."

XII

A terrible lassitude settled over Tommy. He walked out of the bar, out of the hotel, into the raucous darkness of predawn Vieux Carre. He could think only that he wanted to get drunk, helplessly, completely, and obliteratingly drunk, drunker than he'd ever been in all his life before. Yet he knew there was not alcohol enough in Louisiana to wash the defeat and dullness from his brain. He burned with hatred and self-hatred. Suddenly he heard himself laughing wildly at nothing. Only he knew better. He was laughing at his own stupidity. Vigneaux had categorized him exactly, all right. He *was* the simpleton who'd come racing back in answer to Gale's careless whim.

He'd thought of nothing else except that he had won. Gale had changed her mind—sure, changed it one more time, but at least in his favor. She wanted him, after all. This seemed to him only as he'd known all along it should be; he would make her happy, and her name and fortune would make him secure. His sense of relief that she had rejected Vigneaux and chosen him shut out everything else from his consideration. He hadn't even speculated that perhaps Vigneaux had rejected her—that he was no more than a pawn in a cruel game that Vigneaux and Gale played.

They hadn't given a damn what they did to him as long as one was avenged upon the other for a wrong, a slight, a betrayal.

Everything was over and gone between him and Gale. But it was damned near impossible to let go of the dream that had sustained him all these months. He felt bereft. . . .

At ten o'clock the next morning, he drove his buggy into the bridle path of the Michel estate on St. Charles Avenue. Though the sun glowed brilliantly, gardens, hedges, walls, and homes glittering, the world was gray and empty and dead.

He was astonished to find several other carriages parked in the drive, coachmen lolling in the shade and gossiping quietly as they patiently awaited their masters with the dray animals. The big house crackled with activity, with tensions. People, black and white, were abroad everywhere: hurrying, preoccupied, facing another crisis in a world where he didn't belong and where now he knew he never would belong.

He rang the doorbell. At last a gray-haired black butler in rust-colored suit and polished black shoes opened the door. Tommy asked for Miss Michel. The butler nodded, but did not bother to smile. "I'll see, Mastuh." He closed the door.

In less than five minutes, but more than three, Gale opened the door. She wore a simple morning dress of chaste linen; her hair and complexion and person carefully tended by her servants for life. Her rigid cheeks were pallid, her eyes dry. She burst into tears when she saw his face.

"Oh, Paul," she whispered. "My poor Paul. They've lied to you about me, haven't they? They've hurt you . . . They've turned you against me."

"I've got to talk to you," he said.

"Of course you have, my darling." She gripped his hand fiercely, her fingers icy. "Of course you have. But not here."

She led him through the front door and across the foyer to the wide staircase which led to those upper floors that he'd never seen. As they crossed the entry, he glimpsed several people in the parlor, but he recognized none of them.

Gale went quickly up the stairs, clinging to his hand. They went along the shadowed morning corridor toward the east wing. Gale gave him a reassuring smile and opened the door to her bedroom suite. Four young black maids, and Tommy recognized Lily among them, worked in the bedroom, restoring order for another day. Gale ignored the slave girls and led him into a small, private sitting room that overlooked, through tall balcony doorways, the formal gardens of the estate. She

closed the door behind them and turned to face him, ashen and taut.

She came slowly toward him. The room was heavy with morning silences; distantly blue jays chattered in the hedgerows. He stood with his hands at his sides, watching her. "You must help me, Paul," she said. "I'm fighting for my life—more than my life. For your love—your understanding."

"What is there to understand?"

Gale exhaled heavily. "Oh, Paul, you've joined the world against me, haven't you? I know you have. The cold look in your face breaks my heart. You've listened to their lies and you've judged me, and found me guilty. You've condemned me. But, at least, you must hear the truth—from me."

He smiled tautly. "That's why I came, Gale. To hear the truth."

She spread her hands. "How can I talk to you now? Your voice is dead. You're set against me. I cannot stand to look at the accusations in your face."

"I haven't accused you of anything."

Gale straightened, her eyes empty. "What have they told you?"

"*They* haven't told me anything," he said. "Your ex-fiancé was waiting for me at the St. Louis Hotel when I got there last night. He insisted upon telling me the truth—as he saw it—about why you had sent for me."

"And you believed him?"

"He was quite convincing."

"Oh, Paul, how can I even face you, after the vicious lies he's told you?"

He shrugged. "If you say they're lies, I'll believe you."

"Your voice says you'll believe me, but your eyes—your face—say you never will."

"Why don't you stop worrying about what you *think* you see in my face, and tell me truly why you sent for me? Wasn't it because Vigneaux broke your engagement? Because you wanted to hurt him?"

"Oh, Paul, you know I've always loved you."

"But I also know now that love was never enough—never even a real consideration in your scheme of things. Marriage wasn't something made in heaven for you. It was a merger—

between family fortunes. Vigneaux could offer you that and I couldn't—whether you loved me or not didn't matter."

She spoke in a flat tone, empty and without hope. "All right. I was hurt. Desolated when Francois made those terrible, false accusations and broke our engagement. The announcement was in all the papers. Our banns celebrated in the Church. There had been dozens of parties in our honor, and there were to be dozens more. . . . I'm human. I was hurt. Deeply hurt. But most of all I did love you. I do love you."

He shook his head. "But mostly you knew I was the one boob simple enough to come running when you crooked your finger."

"Paul. I knew you loved me. I thought you did."

He stared down at her, colder than ever. "But all that really mattered was, you wanted to hit back at Francois Vigneaux, to make him the laughingstock of New Orleans society—of your world. You wanted to show him—show the world. You broke the engagement first, before he could spread the word, didn't you? You told everybody Paul Lavedon—your own true love—was coming home to you. And you knew I'd come because I was fool enough, even then, to think you really loved me."

"I did love you! None of the rest of it matters. All that matters is that we could be together."

"I'm sorry. It matters to me . . . I love you. God help me, I always will love you, but I won't be used to force Francois Vigneaux to heel at your command. . . . If he came back, even now, you'd still marry him."

"He has come back," she said in a cold, dead tone.

He stared at her. "Of course he has. He's come back. This morning. He and his family. And probably his lawyers and his bankers. They're all downstairs with your family. Sure. The amalgamation of corporate funds is threatened. The consolidation of family names and family money . . . Did they permit you to bring me up here so you could get rid of me quietly—one more time?"

"Oh, Paul. I'm so unhappy. Please don't be cruel."

"So the society wedding—the event of the season—is on again, is it?"

She spoke in a whisper. "They want me to marry Francois. Yes. They're all after me to marry him. . . ."

"Jesus Christ." He stared at her, incredulous. "And that's what you're going to do."

"Paul. My dearest. Try to understand. I've no choice."

He shook his head disbelievingly. "Vigneaux tried to beat me in an alley to keep me away from you. That didn't discourage me. But his money defeated me easily. Last night he tried again to run me away by telling me what you are—what you've always been—"

"Don't hate me, Paul. Please don't hate me."

"What the hell difference does it make if *I* hate you or not? Who the hell am I in this grand scheme of things? I'm nobody. Vigneaux in his infinite wisdom said it best. A law clerk. A pawn used to make him jealous, to whip him back into line."

"Oh, Paul, you must know I love you. Even if I do marry Francois because I must . . . It's you I love."

He stared at her until she winced and let her gaze fall away under his. His mouth twisted bitterly. He shook his head. "You love nobody but yourself. You never have. You never will. For the very simple reason you don't even know how . . . All right, I don't blame you for what has happened to me in all this. You sent for me on a whim and like a fool I came running back. One more time . . . But if you're worried that I'll try to stop your marrying Francois Vigneaux now, you can rest easy. . . . I'm finally sure of just one thing—you deserve each other."

"Oh, Paul, you're so good. Too good for me. I'll never forget you."

He suddenly laughed. "You're goddamned right you won't, my own true love." He strode across the room, yanked the door open and yelled for Lily. "You stand here, outside this door. You let nobody in until I say so. Do you understand?"

He slammed the door then, and locked it. Gale stared at him, her face gray and taut. She shook her head. "Paul, what are you doing? What do you think you're doing?"

Tommy stared down at her. The pressures increased in his lungs until he felt his chest would burst. "I'm making sure you don't forget me, lover. . . . You won't see me again. I promise you that. But you'll never forget me . . . You'll lie in Vigneaux's bed and you'll remember me. You'll be in

Vigneaux's arms, but it will be my arms you want. The truth is, you're never going to forget me."

He caught her in his arms and she twisted, trying to break free. "Paul, don't. The house is full of people. Francois. His family . . . You'll ruin everything again. . . . Please, don't be a fool."

"But I am a fool. If I weren't a fool, I wouldn't even be here now." His hands tightened. He pulled her closer, up on her toes. He bent down over the flawless porcelain beauty of her cheeks, her eyes wide under his. "Don't worry. If Francois catches you naked in my arms, it won't be the first time he caught you, will it?"

Her eyes glittered with sudden hatred and she writhed in his grasp. She fought, trying to get free. "Have you gone mad? If you do this, I'll hate you, Paul, as long as I live."

"I can't think of anything that matters less, my love. Whether you hate me or not doesn't matter anymore. But forgetting me—ah, that's something else. That's something we can't allow."

"Don't. Please. Someone could come through that door."

"The hell with them," he muttered against her face. "They wouldn't even be surprised to find that the nobody is also a rapist. It would only confirm what they already believe about the unwashed rabble."

The color drained from her cheeks. "You have gone insane."

"If I have, take all the credit to yourself. Our love is dead. But I am alive, god damn it. And you're alive—and as long as you live you'll never forget me."

Her head sagged back and she stared up at him, a look of resignation and contempt swirling in her shadowed eyes. His mouth covered hers. His hands caressed her breasts with fierce, helpless hunger. Her nipples hardened under his heated palms and her heart pounded wildly.

She no longer resisted him. She sagged lifeless in his arms. She gazed up at him in cold hatred. He lifted her from her feet and carried her to the love seat near the opened window. "You're making me hate you," she said.

"Hate is hate." His voice rasped against her mouth. "Hate me—for loving you above heaven itself." He removed her clothing. She struggled, but managed only to sink with his

body pressed between her thighs. She whimpered, pleading, but he only thrust himself harder to her.

With knotted fists she beat at his face. But her struggling only set her writhing body closer upon his. She gasped, crying out when he thrust himself to her. Then she lay breathless. Her eyes closed and her head rolled back and forth, her rich hair falling free, but she no longer opposed him.

Tears brimmed beneath her eyelids but did not spill. She chewed at her lips to keep from crying out her ecstasy. Her fists battered at his shoulders, then clawed and dug into them, her nails ripping his flesh. Their mouths struck furiously; for a mindless eternity they clung together, battering, feverish, abandoned.

She panted against his mouth. "Do it, then, damn you. Do it and be damned." Her fingers clawed like talons and her legs locked about his waist, as if to imprison him forever. "Ruin me, damn you. Ruin me and run away . . . That's what you really want, isn't it?"

Her voice rose to a keening wail. He held her, overwhelmed by passions he had never expected to encounter on this sad earth. At last, he tried to pull away, sickened by his attack upon her, but for a long time she would not release him. Then, at last, she sagged under him and lay still. At first they did not move at all. Finally he disengaged himself and left her lying there, her hair wild and free, her clothing in disarray on the floor around her.

He walked out then. He glanced toward the maids, huddled wild-eyed in Gale's sweet-scented bedroom. He said, "You might want to go in and help your mistress get dressed."

He went along the cavernous upper hallway and down the stairs. Francois Vigneaux stood beside the newel post in the foyer. He stared at Tommy, but wisely did not speak. As Tommy slammed the front door behind him, Vigneaux was going up the stairway, two steps at a time.

The sun struck him savagely, basting him in his own sweat. Black coachmen watched him silently. He swung up into the buggy and turned it in the drive. He felt tears well in his eyes, but he supposed people who owned slaves never let them see them crying. He glanced back toward the house, knowing everything in it was lost forever to him and he could

never go back anymore. He would never forget and he could never return.

He snapped the whip, feeling nothing but grief and loss.

He was halfway down the drive when he heard a woman's scream behind him. He jerked hard on the reins, thinking it was Gale. Francois had found her on that love seat and was trying to kill her.

He turned and stood up in the boot, looking back. Lily raced toward him in the sunlight. He began to shake his head. She scrambled up into the carriage beside him. "Take me with you, Mastuh. You leave me here an' I die . . . Please, God, Mastuh, take me with you."

He stared at the slave girl, glanced back at that silent, imposing château. He shrugged. "All right. Let's go . . . I'll take you with me. But I'm damned if I know what I'm going to do with you."

Lily clung to the iron side rail. He slapped the reins and sent the horse at a gallop along the drive and through the gates. He was embroiled in his own loss, barely aware of Lily beside him, and blind to the rest of the world around them.

Lily screamed. She hurled herself against him as a gun blasted from the walk beyond the gateposts. Tommy slapped the whip and jerked his head, staring across his shoulder. He watched little Hobart Cobb, armed with smoking flintlock, run out into the street accompanied by a huge man Tommy had never seen before. He sent the horse racing along the silent avenue.

Part Two

SARDOU

XIII

The four-master *St. Genevieve* hove anchor and set sail with the highest rise of the tide a little past midnight.

The salt-scalded freighter moved from the Esplanade Docks out into the Mississippi, heading downriver in a freshening late night breeze. Disembodied sounds and garish lights trailed after her. New Orleans embarked thousands of oceangoing crafts a year, but the ships that came into port as aliens departed strangers still, gazing back in yearning.

Tommy Verder stood alone in the darkness of the foredeck, pressed against the bulkhead, a shadow within shadow. On the main deck aft dark figures of seamen darted through streaks of steady light from the hatches that cut across the night.

He'd remained unmoving in this shroud of darkness for more than an hour, wary and watchful. He breathed only shallowly, even when he remembered to breathe at all.

He heard the muffled shouts of petty officer, boatswain, and answering seamen. "Steady the foreyards." "Bring her round." "Make fast." "Haul to." "Haul to." "Reeve clear." "Tally on to that gantline."

He did not pretend to understand their unique and unintelligible language of the sea, but he willed them to bend their backs, heave to, hurry. He could not breathe fully until he was on the open gulf and headed south.

As the ship shuddered and bit its way into the current, he tried to tell himself that he was on his way. Since early morning there had been no sign of Hobart Cobb or his huge accomplice, but it had been a strange, sweated, and hectic

day. He had no sense of the challenge and stimulation of a new life ahead. He could not even exalt in escape. Not yet. He felt only the terrible panic and exhaustion of pursuit.

There were signs of the chase. In every public place were hung the Falconhurst fugitive posters, cold proof that Hammond Maxwell had not relaxed his obsessive search for the rogue slave Calico, and never would. Hobart Cobb had begun this eternal day by trying to kill him from ambush, and now Hobart had hired a giant of a man to help him track down his brother's slayer. As crowded and busy as New Orleans was, there was no security for him anywhere, no chance to rest. He had one hope: run. Run fast, run far, keep on running.

At last he'd located a freighter, captained by one Preston Killinsworth, and bearing a Cuban registry. The *St. Genevieve* was loading food, freight, and lumber consigned to Cap Francois, Haiti, and sailing with the tide, reckoned at midnight.

His first problem was Lily, what to do about the slave girl. He would have sold her, or abandoned her, but the hell of it was he had, in his time, been sold and abandoned. He could not do this to the fifteen-year-old octoroon.

With Lily following a few steps behind, he made his way to Congo Square where sprawled a thieves' market of goods, oddments, trinkets, and old clothes, tended by freedmen of color. These stall merchants bought anything slaves wished to sell—clothes pilfered from their masters, or handed on to them as castoffs. In this place, one found almost any article imaginable in the barrows lining the banquette. If one were patient enough to haggle, one could buy anything one found at a price. It was a long walk across the Quarter, and hot, but the way Tommy sweated had little to do with the humidity. He moved warily, not looking over his shoulder, but sure as hell wanting to. By keeping to the shadowed side of the streets under the balconies, and by walking close to the high walls, Tommy managed to appear casual and unhurried.

Lily was enthralled with the overflow crowds of blacks milling in the square. As they worked their way through the narrow sidewalks, she caught glimpses of the wonders of this strange bazaar—goods piled high upon every barrow they passed. The stalls were laden with magic goods, and Lily wondered what fascinating delights might lay hidden in the shadowy interiors.

The square teemed with blacks in festive, holiday moods. They promenaded up and down the banquettes, eating oysters, shrimp, red beans, and rice at the stands, or gossiping in tight groups, or idly examining the merchandise hung to sell in the stalls.

"Think maybe work clothes of some kind will be best for you," Tommy said over his shoulder to the astounded Lily. "Stop gaping. You look like a fly swallower." He stopped before a barrow displaying articles of clothing and managed by a stout black man with a white wooly cap of hair. "Dress you like a boy. That way fewer questions when we travel."

"Got whatever you and the little lady wish," the black man said. "Name of Pierre-Stephane, Mastuh. Gots the best duds in all N'Awleans. I makes the rounds of all the rich folkses every blesset mornin'."

Tommy nodded his head toward Lily. "We're looking for boy's working clothes for her. Not looking for any fancy lady wear."

Pierre-Stephane measured Lily with his smiling black eyes and nodded his approval.

"She make one mighty fine-looking young gentleman, Mastuh. Yas suh! One handsome man. Reckon folks say he looks pretty 'nough to be a gal. Got jes' the somethin' for you. Jes' buyed this mornin'. Belonged to young Master Alain over to St. Charles Avenue. Pore chile. Got hisself kilt when his gelding pony got skittish and throwed him. Jus' broke his neck, po' chile. His folks swear these clothes ain't hardly been mussed."

Pierre-Stephane disappeared inside a stall and emerged with a bundle carefully wrapped and tied in an old blanket. He opened the covering to display a suit of forest-green linen which he held up proudly for Lily's inspection. Lily fingered the fine fabric with its satin lining. Even if it was for a male, it was far lovelier than anything she had ever dreamed, with a square collar and scalloped shirtfront. Tommy said that the outfit didn't look much like work clothes to him, but at the sadness in Lily's face, and the disapproval darkening the old man's eyes, he retreated. "If that's what you want, try it on. If it fits, we'll buy it."

"Oh, it fit," Pierre-Stephane said, nodding. "Li'l Master

Alain, he weren't big for his age—kindly spindly, too. It be a prime fit."

As Lily changed clothes inside the stall, Tommy and Pierre-Stephane haggled over the price, finally agreeing that five dollars was fair. When Lily stepped out in front of the booth, both Tommy and the storekeeper stared at her in approbation. The fashionable skintight pantaloons hugged her thighs and hips in a way that intensified every curve and arc and plane. No boy was ever going to look like that in these clothes. The coat fit well, as did the ruffled shirt. Pierre-Stephane bobbed his head up and down. "Mighty excellent fit, Mastuh. Like it made for her."

"Not much like working clothes," Tommy said to Lily. "But with a pair of new boots, you ought to look enough like a boy to get by, and that's all that matters right now."

"Got jus' the boots for her," Pierre-Stephane said.

"Came right off Master Alain's dead feet," Tommy teased.

But the old black man was watching Lily. "What size shoe do you wear, honey?"

Lily looked at both of them and shrugged. She had no idea. The calfskin boots Pierre-Stephane found in his box of Alain's belongings fit her well, and Tommy bought them for another dollar.

The aging black man offered to wrap a neat parcel of Lily's old clothes, but Tommy told him to keep them. Though he was the only white-skinned person in the crowded square, he was growing nervous and restive, anxious to get out of the place.

Walking away, Tommy appraised Lily, wondering how many people would believe her to be a boy? Her shoulders were small, sloping. Her face was delicately hewn, but capped with a mop of black hair which could be male or female. Rich young plantation gentlemen often had effeminate-looking black boys to attend them, and he was certain Lily might pass as one of them.

They paused in the square. She drank a watermelon ice and he had coffee served by an enormous black woman in cotton dress, sooty apron, and bandanna. She laughed and crooned while her customers imbibed at her stand. The coffee was hot and bitter with chicory. Tommy laced it liberally with long sweetening and milk. Lily stood in the sunlight enjoying her

new clothes, her ice drink, and the magic sights and sounds around her. Tommy retreated enough to put his back to a wall as he drank his coffee. He watched for ambushers; staying alive meant staying alert.

It was a long summer day. The sun set around nine. As soon as it was dark, Tommy hailed a hack and, with Lily in her green suit, went to the docks. The driver wanted to stop at the lighted terminal ramp, but Tommy sharply ordered him to put them out in a dark and isolated area.

He stood unmoving, with Lily and his carpetbags beside him, until the hack rolled away across the cobbles. Out of the night rose wails of ship's whistles and foghorns. Buoy lights winked in the channels.

Tommy nodded toward the *St. Genevieve*. Carrying his bag, he herded Lily across the damp, high-piled pier toward the gangplank.

They had gone only a few yards, crossing a long pennant of light, when a little man, only sightly taller than Lily, stepped from the darkness and caught Tommy's arm.

Tommy lunged away, startled. The little man, in black broadcloth suit and derby, shook his head from side to side. "I'm sorry, sir. Let me apologize. I did not mean to startle you."

Tommy kept walking. "Well, you did, jumping at me out of the dark."

"My deepest apology, sir. My name is Billips. Stanford Billips, sir. I believe I'm looking for you. Are you Mr. Verder? Mr. Tommy Verder?"

Tommy stopped walking. The dock and the terminal, the ships and the world, seemed suddenly unreal and insubstantial and he fought at the webbings of nightmare. "No." His voice rasped. "That's not my name. Please get out of my way."

Stanford Billips retreated a step. He stood shaking his head and muttering abject apologies.

Sweated, Tommy muttered at Lily to keep moving and strode toward the lighted gangplank. Though they were less than twenty yards from the ship, he was suddenly afraid they could not make that brief passage. If a man stepped from the darkness looking for him and calling him Tommy Verder, what chance did he have for pursuers who knew him as Lavedon and had shot at him as recently as this morning?

Sweat beaded his forehead and ran down into his eyes though the wind off the river was chill and smart. A few feet from the gangplank, Tommy could resist no longer. He felt as if he wore a target in the middle of his back. He jerked his head around, peering into the darkness. His heart thudded crazily. The little man, Billips, stood unmoving where they'd left him.

In rising panic, Tommy swung back around. Lily cried out a warning, but she was too late. A young dandy, dressed to the nines and followed by blacks carrying carpetbags and steamer trunks, strode unseeingly. He struck against Tommy, bounced off, and then moved forward again.

Tommy stumbled and would have fallen, but he struck the gangplank banister and caught himself. "Why the hell don't you look where you're going?"

The young fop had started up the gangplank. He paused as if startled that Tommy had dared address him. "Are you speaking to me, sir?"

"You know damned well I am," Tommy said. "You almost ran me down."

The young man bestowed the most disarming of smiles down upon Tommy. "But you were in my way, sir."

"And you just walk over everybody who gets in your way?" Tommy demanded.

The stranger laughed again, warmly. "You mean am I my brother's keeper, sir? No, sir, I am not. If I have inconvenienced you, or disturbed you, you have my deepest apology. But this is no matter to iron out here, do you think? We will have ample time to talk it over aboard ship, won't we?"

Imperiously he jerked his head and his baggage handlers followed in his wake up the gangplank. For a moment frustrated, Tommy stood staring up at the wide slender shoulders in tailored pearl-gray coat and arrogantly tilted head in top hat. Hatred flared through him—not for the man alone, but all his friends, brothers, and peers.

He drew a deep breath and held it for the count of ten. He jerked his head and Lily followed him up the plank. A steward met them there and escorted them to their stateroom.

Lily was exhausted. She pulled off her new clothing, folding each piece carefully and placing it in a bureau drawer. Then, wearing an old shirt of Tommy's, she climbed into the

upper bunk. Within moments she was fast asleep, breathing deeply.

Tommy gazed around, feeling as if he were caged in this stateroom. He tested the door, found it locked. His porthole looked out on the silent and star-licked river.

He paced the small crib. He did not know how he could go on staying quietly in this room until the *St. Genevieve* sailed. He heard steps in the corridor. It seemed they paused before his door, moved on.

He looked about helplessly, trying to find something to divert his mind from Hobart Cobb, from Stanford Billips and whatever in the hell he wanted, from Hammond Maxwell and his reward in gold, and the faceless bounty hunters it would spawn. The bullet wound in his side was suddenly painful. It was almost a year and a half old by now, and sudden stitches of pain still brought Hammond and Hammond's gun vividly back to mind. An inch to the right and Ham would have missed him that night on the riverboat. An inch to the left and he would have killed him.

He saw the newspaper that lay folded on the table beside his bunk.

Thankful for anything to distract his attention from his pursuers, he took up the paper and opened it. The periodical looked fresh and untouched, but his gaze touched the dateline at once. His hands shook. This edition was three months old.

Front-page headlines attacked him. Those huge black words were like lances piercing his brain through his eyes:

YOUNG PLANTATION ARISTOCRAT
FOUND SLAIN; BODY
FINALLY IDENTIFIED

According to the news story, a young cotton heir, Paul Eugene Lavedon, missing for months before his body was recovered, had now been positively identified.

Paul Lavedon, grandson of Louisiana State Supreme Court Justice Ambrose LaMarr Lavedon, had been shot once between the eyes, according to parish law officials.

Lavedon's body had been found in the Mississippi River by flatboaters. The corpse had lain unidentified in the parish morgue for weeks until the Lavedon family lawyers called in

a Baton Rouge dentist who positively identified bridge and other dental repairs performed only a few days before young Lavedon disappeared.

Parish lawmen told reporters that a fugitive black, a six-fingered mulatto who often posed as a white man, was being sought in connection with the murder investigation. The rogue slave was said to have been in the vicinity at the time of young Lavedon's disappearance.

The newspaper alleged that the fugitive, registered at birth as a Falconhurst slave, Calico, was also known as Tommy Verder. Further, according to the parish sheriff, Calico also used other aliases in his flight to escape prosecution. The rewards for return or information about Calico were discussed in detail. A second five thousand in gold had been offered by the family of the deceased Paul Lavedon.

Sick, Tommy went on holding the newspaper for a long time. Then he shredded it in his fists and threw it through the porthole. Still, he felt only slightly better. He could not stay, sweating, in this room, waiting for whoever had placed that newspaper there for him. There was nothing he could do, but he would feel better, less helpless waiting hidden in the dark until this ship cleared port. . . .

XIV

He would always remember his first troubled days aboard the *St. Genevieve*: its slanting, narrow decks, the far rugged coastline lingering in the distance, the unsettled purple surface of the gulf, the pastels of the twilight sky and the first golden shaft laid across its face by the rising sun.

Lily did not share his affection for the sea. For two days after they sailed from New Orleans, the fractious gulf made her life unbearable. She was seasick, and she hated him, and when she had strength to spare, she berated him and blamed him for bringing her along just to kill her. "If you wanted to be rid of me," she wept, "why didn't you just shoot me on land where at least I could of got a decent burial with a church choir and hymns?" Her narrow bunk confined her like a cage, closed upon her shoulders, and she let her feet dangle lifelessly over the side. Her pillow had been poured of concrete, she swore. "Why don't I die?" she cried. "How much of this must I stand before I can die?"

Tommy smiled at her. "You never die when dying would be the easy way. If I've learned anything in my misspent life, I've learned that."

During those first days, the erratic choppy tossing of the ship disturbed Tommy. He was never seasick; he simply remained in a state of constant nausea. He prowled the decks, watchful and weary, hoping the chilled sea breezes would temper the discomfort behind his eyes and in the pit of his belly.

Captain Preston Killinsworth himself hailed Tommy each turn past the poop deck. Killinsworth was a man of medium

height, with short, squat legs and elongated torso. His great gray beard seemed caked with the salt of seven seas and in his eyes smoldered the strange lights of alien places.

"Hail, matey," Killinsworth called. "How be ye this fine day?"

"Getting my sea legs I think." Tommy tried to sound gracious.

"Don't see your nigger boy, Mr. Lavedon. Ain't he up an' around?"

Tommy shook his head. "He's seasick. He hates the sea, the ship, you and the whole world, but especially me."

"He'll outlive that. You should have seen my ships when I used to bring a hundred blacks like your boy across the middle passage. Bound together amid decks, and all of them terrible, violent, and nasty seasick. Those poor black bastards not made sick by the stale air and the pitch of the waves, vomited at the stink of the others' vomit. Man the pumps and wash them down a dozen times a day, and swab the decks, and in twenty minutes it was stinking again. Tell your boy he's got it good now, a-livin' in our finest cabins and eatin' our finest food." He laughed. "Or he can eat, when he's up to it."

Tommy nodded and resumed his lonely vigil. He stayed taut and alert, listening for the telltale whisper of whoever it was who had left that old newspaper, freshly folded, in his cabin. Remembering added to his emptiness and sense of nausea.

On each turn about the upper deck, from the nude nymph at the fore beam, which Captain Killinsworth volunteered was an artistic statue of the fabulous *St. Genevieve* herself, to the last plank aft, Tommy noted new gear and instruments and stacked merchandise he'd not seen before. This encouraged him; he was feeling less nauseated if he was noticing things around him.

He paused beside a great humped glob beneath tightly lashed tarpaulin, intrigued and curious. Whatever the thing was it was secured against gales and covered against wind and weather. It took a long time, but he was able to loosen one of the knots enough to peek inside.

He straightened, shocked. The canvas covered a cannon. There was nothing extraordinary in a cannon being trans-

ported south these days, but what a cannon. It was gold, mounted on the finest polished metal and ironwood cart. He ran his hand over the smoothed, hand-rubbed surface. It looked as if it were cast from solid gold.

Tommy stood entranced. He could not take his eyes from the fabulous weapon.

A sudden voice blasted from above and behind him, amplified by a megaphone and cutting across the wind like a knife in hot butter. "This here is the captain, Mister. I must ask you to get the bloody hell away from that there merchandise and to stay away from it, on my orders."

"Now you've got the old sea lion all upset, haven't you, old huntstumper?"

Tommy lurched forward, startled. He turned on his heels and braced his back against the caisson. He stared at the grinning young dandy who had walked over him at the gangplank. The man was as splendidly attired as he had been at their first meeting, except he wore no top hat, probably having discovered the hard way this was a losing battle against the gulf winds. His rich dark tresses bobbled gently on his forehead and grew down fashionably over his high collar.

Tommy's eyes blazed. "You believe in walking up on people unannounced, don't you?"

Those long-lashed black eyes laughed, taunting him. "And you, sir, have a mighty penchant for being places you have no business being, don't you?"

Captain Killinsworth's amplified voice blasted at them again. "I've given you people an order. Get away from that merchandise, or I'll have you put in irons. Now that's an order."

The young fop went on standing—unmoved, unabashed, unimpressed by the captain's order. He smiled faintly. "What is this thing that's got the old pirate so upset?"

Tommy shook his head, incredulous and unbelieving still. "It's a cannon."

"What's there about a cannon to get the captain's balls in an uproar?"

Tommy hesitated. "It's a cannon you would not believe. It looks as if it were cast of pure gold."

"You're playing me for a fool." He jerked up the flap of

canvas Tommy had loosened. His eyes widened. "Name of God. It is gold. Maybe it's gold plating over metal casting."

"The captain acts like it's the real article."

"Don't he though?" He took a small knife from his pocket, opened its blade and bent down beside the fieldpiece.

"You scar that there cannon, you bastid landlubber, and I'll throw you in the brig and so help me God, you'll stay there until we reach Haiti."

The young stranger ignored the shouting of the captain. He grinned toward Tommy. "Pay no attention to the old shellback. He's too old and lazy to come down here himself. If he sends one of his able seamen, we'll punch the shit out of him. Cramped up on this tub makes me mean and puts me in the mood to hit somebody."

"Why would anybody want a gold cannon?" Tommy said.

"I think we're going to find out, old-timer. Here comes the captain himself." The man grinned. "Boilin' with fury and self-importance, he is."

"A captain is like an emperor aboard his own ship," Tommy said.

The stranger grinned. "Well, that's what a captain will tell you. It's the myth they've circulated about until they believe it themselves."

Tommy gazed at the young stranger, finding in him an arrogance that was somehow more than familiar. He decided the last time he'd encountered such self-confidence and brazen conceit and insolence was in the Creole millionaire Vigneaux. Here was another young Southron elitist who owned the world and let you understand it from the outset.

He found himself hating this elegant young fop. His ingrained distrust of such men, learned over years of association, cautioned him to steer clear. Yet he had to admit the fellow was proud, cultured, and self-assured for a reason; he was what he'd been trained to be. He was also extraordinarily handsome, too, with patrician features, wide dark eyes, and the trim, athletic body of the swordsman.

Tommy tried to hide his resentment. The young gladiator said, "My name is Jean-Pierre Sardou, sir. Shall we close ranks against the vulgar enemy?"

Tommy smiled. They shook hands. "My name is Lavedon," he said.

"Ah, Lavedon, eh? An old Delta family. Are you part of that tribe?"

"I'm afraid not," Tommy said. "I come from Alabama."

"Lavedon. Must be a rare name in Alabama."

Tommy shrugged. "I suppose."

Captain Killinsworth charged between them, brushing them aside like some seagoing craft attacking tugs. "Now, what's all this shit about not obeyin' me direct orders? Ye must know and realize and understand, the both of ye, that ye are tolerated on this here ship at my indulgence. This here is a freighter, for your holy information, and we take on passengers totally as a convenience and a bargain, and with the clear understanding that my word is law aboard there here tub. Is that clear?"

"Is this cannon truly pure gold?" Sardou inquired.

Captain Killinsworth stared at young Sardou, caught between towering rage and helpless frustration. How did a God-fearing seaman deal with such landlubbing arrogance? Tommy grinned faintly, in sympathy. He understood Killinsworth's confusion. You accepted men of Sardou's caste at their own evaluation, or you killed them. And poking around forbidden merchandise, unwholesome as it was, was hardly a capital offense.

The captain exhaled a full breath and shook his head. He gestured toward the covered trappings. "Aye. Purest gold it is. The finest quality Mexican ore, with enough metal and steel and brass fired in to give it balance and strength."

"Will it really fire a round?" Sardou said.

"Now, how in hell do I know, Mister? And what difference does it make?"

"Why else would a man want such a fancy cannon if it can't be fired?"

"I never said it couldn't be fired. I suppose it can. But it was never cast to serve in violence. It is beautifully engraved and etched. Such beauty you've never met, that handworked lettering. It's a state gift for Don Juan Zaccone."

"Who in hell is Don Juan Zaccone?" Tommy said.

Now both Sardou and the captain gazed at him, incredulous. "Where in hell have you been, Mister?" Killinsworth said. "If you're goin' to Haiti, as you signed, you best know Don Juan Zaccone. He's the new emperor of Haiti."

Sardou laughed. "Though he may not still be head of the state by the time we get there. Don Juan Zaccone was the most trusted general of the former emperor, another general who himself had deposed the first emperor of Haiti and declared himself dictator." He glanced knowingly at Killinsworth. "So you hope to buy your way into Zaccone's good graces with a cannon, eh?"

Killinsworth shrugged. "You know a better way to charm a military man?"

With a bluff air of false friendliness and warmth, Killinsworth took both Tommy and Sardou by the elbows and walked them away from the gold cannon. Tommy saw that a seaman quickly retied the lashings covering the imperial gift. He also saw that Sardou definitely but unobtrusively removed his arm from the captain's grasp.

"You fellows can find plenty to amuse yourselves aboard my ship without pokin' your noses in where they don't belong," Killinsworth said in his most affable tone. "We got a well-stocked bar in the salon. You can always find a game of high-stakes poker going on night and day somewhere. I got no wish to be unfriendly, but I do have me laws aboard this ship and they must be obeyed. We don't obey the laws, what we got? We got anarchy. I don't need that sailin' these infested waters."

"Infested?" Sardou's brow tilted.

"Aye. By murderous vermin. You gentlemen wish to be of some use to me, and not a continual thorn in my side, you might use some of your great energy watching for the sea scum. You keep your eyes peeled for the first wink of some freebooter's topsail."

"Pirates?" Sardou laughed.

"Aye. They still infest these waters. Privateers. Slave runners. And plain sea vultures, wrecking an honest man's craft to salvage and to claim what they can."

"And you want us to watch for unfriendly sails, eh?" Sardou inquired.

"Aye. The ship's company is alert. Watchin' the horizons all the time. It can be a help to me, I admit, but it might well help to save your own skins, too."

Sardou grinned, but went along with the captain's serious

tone. "And what is it you wish us to do if we happen to spy a black pennant, Captain?"

Captain Killinsworth laughed, though his eyes remained as cold as North Atlantic waters. "Do? Why, we turn tail and run, at the first sight of a threat, M'sieu. I may not be the bravest captain ever you sailed with, but I am a survivor, because I warrant I am the smartest. A man lives to tomorrow by not bein' too proud to run today."

In the next few days Tommy found himself haunted by the eternal presence of Jean-Pierre Sardou. He could hardly escape him for an hour at a time. Tommy wanted to avoid the young plantation dandy, not only because he sensed something just off-key about Sardou—one is never truly comfortable with a friendly snob—but because Sardou represented a class of the white elite Tommy had learned to detest and to mistrust. There was something about Sardou that put the hackles up on his neck, and at first he could not say why. Instinctively he knew something was wrong, but he could not figure what it was, and so besides trying to shun Sardou's company, he stayed on guard.

Shipboard is never an easy place upon which to elude or stand aloof from any cruise mate, friend, enemy, or casual associate. After the first hour at sea, a ship becomes a small, tight world, or at best a village where everyone is known to everyone else, even if such acquaintance is not always acknowledged. There are precious few places to hide, or to find sanctuary, in that constricted, bobbing cosmos. All lives become intermingled. One becomes involved, like it or hate it. Tommy tried to steer clear of Sardou, but it was not that easy. Sardou was persistent, determined to be friendly—closer than friends. They were the only travelers of their class; for this reason they had to stand together, shoulder to shoulder against the rabble. And he repeated constantly that he believed there was great possibility of mutual profit in a partnership between them.

Tommy tried not to laugh. "A partnership?"

Sardou sagged back in his salon chair and signaled for fresh drinks. He lighted a long thin Havana cigar and puffed furiously until its leaves caught. "An opportunity for you."

"Why would you offer some golden opportunity to a stranger like me?"

"Why? Because we can work well together. We belong to the same class. Anyone can look at us and see that. And besides, it won't be easy for either one of us down in Haiti, although Zaccone and his new regime insist white people can be accepted and can live safely down there now. It's been twenty-five years of bloodbath down there. I have bought this huge plantation. Before the revolution it was the richest in the country. It can be again if it is managed right. And that's why I'm going down there. To manage it right. But it won't be easy for a white man alone. That's why I'd like you to buy in as a partner. Two guns are better than one."

"Sounds like you're not very hopeful."

"Of course I'm hopeful. But I'm not a fool. I'm a pragmatist. I look at things as they really are. Until I met you aboard this ship, I had planned to try to pass as a mulatto when I got to Haiti."

Tommy bit back the laughter at the irony of this idea. He said only, "Why would you do that?"

"Very simple. To stay alive. I hoped to pass as a mulatto because white people are slain like rats in Haiti these days. It must appear that blacks own the plantation, or natives would burn it."

"And so you are willing to sell me an interest in this farm?" Tommy watched Sardou across the top of his glass.

Sardou nodded. "A half interest."

"Half? My God, something must be fishy."

"Not at all. I have considered the matter calmly. Half a fortune is better than waking up some morning alone and decapitated. For twenty thousand dollars—American, and cash—you could own half the most promising land in Haiti."

Now Tommy did laugh aloud. "Twenty thousand dollars. Cash. Where would I get twenty thousand dollars?"

"Write home. To your people. The Lavedons are well-heeled."

Tommy shook his head, laughing. "So that's your game. You thought I was rich. One of the rich Louisiana Lavedons. Even when I told you I was not."

"I was giving you an opportunity to triple your money in a year. In one harvest."

Tommy stared at Sardou, brow lifted, eyes wide. He only laughed.

Sardou's face changed from cool confidence to puzzlement, to blanched gray anger. "Why do you laugh, M'sieu?"

Tommy shook his head. "You. Trying to sell me a half interest in a Haitian farm."

"Why not? I told you it can be productive—"

"I doubt that—"

"It's one of the few enterprises on the entire island still controlled—and to be operated—by whites."

"I doubt that, too."

Sardou's dark eyes chilled. "Are you calling me a liar, M'sieu?"

"Practically. I've figured out your interest in me."

"I warn you, suh. Don't belittle my honor—"

The word *honor* sent Tommy into another helpless spasm of laughter. Sardou's face remained bleakly gray, cheek muscles rigid.

"—I warn you, M'sieu."

Tommy lifted his hand, shaking his head. "Don't be a fool."

"A *fool,* M'sieu? Now you add *fool* to *liar*?"

Tommy took a long drink. "I'm trying to tell you, Sardou. It's not a matter of honor at all."

"It is to me, M'sieu."

"In a fight, I'd break you into pieces."

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. I'm thinner. Granted. But I'm taller. Maybe I am even stronger. And I have been gravely insulted."

"Well, I'm not going to fight you anyhow. Not over a trivial matter."

"Trivial?" Now Sardou's lips grayed out and his eyes glittered. "My honor—a trivial matter? You try to antagonize me, arouse me to rage. Trivial. Fool. Liar. How many insults do you think I'll endure from you without retaliation, suh?"

"Only one more. No more than one, M'sieu Sardou. Surely." Tommy, laughing, waved his arms in a gesture of truce. "You are either as stupid as you thought me, or as gullible."

"I? Stupid? Gullible?"

"Oh, I know." Tommy poured more Cointreau into both

glasses. "I was your—mark? Eh? Chosen as the pigeon to be plucked? But you should have done a little homework, Sardou. You should have investigated me first."

"Investigated?"

Tommy nodded. "Why, I couldn't buy an interest in your Haitian Eden, even if I were as gullible as you think me, even if such an enterprise actually existed."

"Be careful, my friend. You push me too far."

"I'm trying to spare you. Can't you understand that? I'm not a rich man, Sardou. I'm broke. As broke as you probably are. Perhaps more. The only difference between us, it appears, is that you are a confidence man, and I am not."

Sardou stared at Tommy. The blood returned slowly to Jean-Pierre's face, gradually tracing its way upward through his lean cheeks. With a flow of blood came the return of his sense of humor.

"You are not one of the wealthy Lavedons?" Tommy shook his head. Sardou laughed tentatively. "You are broke?"

"Why else would I be on my way to take a job on a godforsaken island controlled and owned and dominated by murderous blacks?"

"But—your elegant clothes?"

"Sorry to deceive you, old fellow. My last real went to buy these duds. I was to marry a very rich girl back in New Orleans. I had to dress the part, no? An adventurer like you must see that. Of that entire unfortunate episode, I have left only the sartorial finery."

"Oh, my God," Sardou said. "I've got to be more careful in the future when I choose my targets. I swear I feel like I'm losing my touch."

Tommy had thought perhaps Sardou now would shun him, since he knew him to belong to that unwashed rabble which Sardou held in such contempt. However, as the days passed, Sardou was friendlier than ever.

Tommy found that Sardou was a likeable scamp and good—if persistent—company. He appeared to have forgiven Tommy for being too broke to fleece; in fact now, he said, he could accept Tommy as his friend. Sardou possessed a sharp, curious mind. He told off-color jokes well, often, and with great dramatic ability. He chatted with Tommy about Delta society

people as if they were Tommy's intimates. At first, Tommy explained patiently that being from Alabama he knew few if any of these Louisiana nobles. Sardou seemed not to hear his protests, or if he heard, not to care. Finally Tommy simply pretended to listen as they strolled the decks and passed the lazy days at sea.

They jogged about the ship; they drank and ate their meals together. They exchanged lies about their amorous conquests. At least, Tommy was certain Sardou lied. Sardou's tales were more like a masturbator's fevered fantasies than anything grounded in fact; they were simply too fantastic to be true.

One afternoon as they promenaded the decks, Sardou stopped abruptly and caught Tommy's arm. "Look." He extended his arm, pointing. "Yonder. On the horizon."

Tommy watched distant pennants of a passing brigantine.

"We're in the roads around the Dry Tortugas," Sardou said. "That could be a privateer. Or maybe one of Lafitte's ships. They patrol these lanes."

"Should we warn the captain?"

"Killinsworth?" Sardou shook his head, grinning in a strange, cold way. "Why should we tell him? He has paid lookouts." They glanced toward the crow's nest where a seaman perched, peacefully asleep in the subtropical sun. "Anyway, Killinsworth is likely a bigger pirate than the one passing yonder."

They continued their stroll, but Tommy had new doubts about Sardou. Here was a man who was far more, or far less, than he seemed.

But suspecting Sardou, and even wishing to avoid him, did not help him evade him. Each morning Sardou appeared at Tommy's cabin door—freshly shaven, smiling, and anxious to accompany him to the galley for breakfast. Tommy would stifle the distrust that Sardou's behavior engendered and spend another day with him.

Tommy found Sardou more than mildly interested in Lily, though he introduced her as his male body slave. He wondered if Sardou was deceived. Sardou was forever touching Lily, even when she tried to elude him. Sardou would punch her bicep, and when she staggered, he laughed. "Come on, boy. Stand up like a man."

Tommy told Sardou that Lily's name was Little, but that he

called his servant Lil for short. Sardou caught Lily about the neck in a hammerlock. "I envy you your manservant, Lavedon. I brought none, because taking another nigger to Haiti seemed like taking another coal to Newcastle. . . . But I agree. You won't find a better-looking boy in the islands." He nodded, running his hands over Lily's shoulders, back, and thighs. "Yes, indeed, you're a fortunate man to have such a fine boy with you."

When they were alone, Lily complained about the way Sardou was always "fingering" her. Resentment darkened her face.

Tommy shrugged. "It's just habit, Lil. All white plantation owners think they're slave flesh experts. It's more fashionable these days to be expert on slaves than on horseflesh."

"I don't like that white man. There's something wrong with him. And, besides, I'm your slave, not his. He should keep his hands off me."

Tommy laughed. "Well, the next time he starts fingering you, kill him. You have my permission."

One afternoon when Sardou disappeared immediately after lunch, Tommy felt a sense of release and relief. He would have a little time to himself. Yawning, he returned to his cabin, planning to take a nap. The deeper the ship sailed into the warm tropic zone, the more appealing became the idea of the siesta.

He found his cabin quiet and empty, but thought nothing of this. After the first two days at sea, Lily had recovered and had not been ill or queasy again.

He crossed the cabin and sank upon the lower bunk. He was just about to sink into sleep when the cabin door was wrenched open. He lunged up on the mattress, wary and shaken.

It was Lily, wailing, her clothing torn and her face pallid. "Goddamn him," she wept. "You know what that bastard tried to do to me?"

"Calm down," Tommy said. He swung out of the bunk and stood up. "Tell me what happened. What's the matter?"

"Your dear friend Sardou," Lily said, voice quavering with rage. "He came here. He said you had told him I would help him unpack his trunks in his cabin. I didn't want to go, but he insisted it was your order. The minute he got me in his

cabin, he locked the door and tried to tear my clothes off. He said he would beat me if I didn't stand still."

Before Tommy could speak the stateroom door was thrown open again and Sardou burst into the cabin. His face was contorted and his voice shook with body-wracking rages. "You!" he shouted. "Goddamn you, Lavedon. I ought to kill you for this."

"What's the matter with you?" Tommy said.

"Your idea of some monstrous joke on me, is it?" Sardou trembled.

Tommy stood looking from Sardou to Lily. "Maybe you'd like to tell me what's wrong, Jean-Pierre?"

"You. Damn it. You. That's what's wrong. What kind of pervert are you, Lavedon? You let me think this—this nigger wench—was a boy."

Tommy shrugged. "I let you think what you wanted to think. What difference did it make?"

Sardou looked as if he might froth at the mouth. "Difference? Difference, damn you. I got myself all worked up and set for pleasuring—and this—this goddamn black slave of yours turns out not to be a stud at all, but a damned mare. You set me up for that, and I'll never forgive . . . I may even kill you."

Tommy retreated a step. He braced himself against the bulkhead. Both Sardou and Lily stared at him, livid with hatred. Tommy laughed. Laughter boiled and bubbled low inside him and erupted violently. He sagged against the wall, laughing.

Tommy waved his arm toward his beautiful little slave. "At least now, Lily, you're totally safe from Sardou's advances." He roared again with laughter. "Now that he knows you're a female."

XV

Tensions aboard the *St. Genevieve* intensified as a break in the long, monotonous days at sea loomed in a Havana stopover for the Cuban-registered ship. Seaman worked faster, as if challenging time, filled with erotic fantasies of shore leave in the siren city. Lily looked forward to walking for just a little while on terra firma. It seemed a heavenly idea to take a forward step without having to lurch wildly and grab for support.

Tommy stood at the prow of the ship, watching the dim blur of land blue against the tan horizon. He was forever amazed at the deception in distance perception at sea. One saw Cuba, a vague strip upon the clear sapphire of the sea, and one's pulses quickened with the hope of being soon ashore. But sometimes land was sighted ten hours before a ship reached port, a hump of formless dunes swollen belly-up from the sea, looking as lifeless as some bloated whale.

He stood unmoving and watched the purpled blur turn green against the horizon. The green dissolved into orange-striped fields of sugarcane and spindly royal palms. Blue water boiled into gray spume against rocky shores or sped in ever-weakening strides high on sandy beaches. Finally he could determine the shapes of houses, red roofs glittering in blazing sunlight. Ox carts inched along dirt roads that snaked through the cane tracts.

"Cuba produces more sugarcane than any other country," Sardou said at his shoulder. He spoke casually, as if he'd been standing there for a long time rather than appearing abruptly and without a sound.

"You'd make a great cat burglar," Tommy said without turning.

"Not me." Sardou shook his head. "A man as smart as I am can make many millions in the slave trade. That's why I'm interested in Haiti and Cuba. England and the United States have outlawed trade in slaves, and embargoed shipment. But Cuba is more enlightened. And for a damn good reason. If they are to continue to produce more sugarcane than anybody else, they've got to be able to import slaves. And importing leads to exporting. As long as the cane fields continue to kill off laborers, even the strongest, in a year or so, they've got to keep buying blacks from somewhere."

"So that's your newest operation, is it?" Tommy said. He watched the ship progress along the rugged coast. Sprawling farms gave way to rows of gray fortifications. A huge fire basket blazed high on coastal rocks. The ship, which had been gliding along parallel with the shore, now tacked and rode in toward the beacon. The ship moved into the narrow entrance of the anchorage of Havana Harbor. Gray, formidable fortresses reared along the shoreline of the port.

"You have no interest in getting rich?" Sardou said.

Tommy laughed. "How much will it cost me this time?" He felt he could almost reach out and touch the forts guarding either shore. Excitement built around them as Havana closed in upon them, the metropolis of the tropics, crossroads to the Caribbean. A stunning spectacle flared before him: buildings of white and adobe brown and strange pastels, fringed and tufted with lacy green palm fronds. The water suddenly churned with small boats, loud with vendors of every ware produced in this sunstruck Eden—bananas, oranges, lemons, limes, avocadoes, mangoes, tobacco.

"Do you have some objection to getting rich—almost without risk?" Sardou inquired. "Does being wealthy somehow offend you?"

"No," Tommy said across his shoulder. "It is you who offends me."

Sardou caught his breath. "I try to be friendly. What is it with you that you must prove yourself my superior?"

Tommy laughed. "I just don't like you."

"Do you have to like me to allow me to make you rich?"

"You're not interested in enriching anyone but yourself, Sardou."

"This time there's plenty for both of us."

The *St. Genevieve* hove to. Longboats, manned by sailors pulling on the long sweeps, towed her in against a long pier extending out into the bay. Here waited a huge timber, crosslike derrick used for unloading cargo.

Tommy watched the dockworkers and seamen securing the ship with mammoth hawsers. He said, "You may as well give up on me, Sardou. Find yourself another turkey to pluck. I have told you, I will not fall for one of your confidence games."

"It is because you mistrust me, and because your distrust pains me that I am determined to let you see, at least, the fortune to be made in trading for slaves."

Tommy gazed around, intoxicated by the wonder and strangeness of this exotic new world. The sun blazed with a blinding, incandescent brilliance. You almost felt you could watch tropical plants growing in this intense, hothouse humidity. His shirt was already sweated down. He shook his head. "I've told you. I am taking a job in Haiti."

"All the more reason for you to come with me. A friend of mine. He will make you open your eyes and your mind to the possibilities. Just come with me for a visit. That's all I ask. Nothing more."

As usual it was easier to submit to Sardou's persistence than oppose it. Throwing up his hands in frustration, Tommy agreed to accompany Sardou on this wild-goose chase, mostly to shut him up. And, too, he would have the opportunity to see something of this magnificent old town on this brief stopover. Sardou assured him he spoke Spanish as fluently as any native.

They walked together along the long stretch of the pier which was littered with shipping crates and piles and boxes and barrels of exotic fruit. Black stevedores, naked to the waist, passed bundles from swaying arms to swaying arms. They matched their movements to the precise rhythm of a continuous, low-pitched chant. In one of the first stalls encroaching upon the docks, an aged women pared oranges, peeling falling in bright and unbroken ribbons about her feet.

She, too, hummed in a monotonous chant, part sales pitch and part ethnic hymn from her past. Men stood in makeshift stalls, offering bananas, fruit juices freshly squeezed, shoe shines, or strong coffee without milk. Sardou told him real Cuban men didn't drink milk in their coffee after ten in the morning. The atmosphere crackled and sang with their din of voices, and steamed with a hundred different odors.

Long before they reached the street, a young woman stepped out of a shadowed kiosk, smilingly brazenly. Her thin blouse was cut low at the bodice so it barely concealed her nipples. Her singing invitation—soft, urgent, and sensual—was incomprehensible, but Tommy had no difficulty understanding what she offered. Under smeared mascara, she was young and lovely, in her teens, with rounded hips and full, high-standing breasts. Tommy felt himself tempted, but Sardou cursed her and told her to lose herself. She stood, legs apart, hands on her hips, making obscene gestures in their wake.

"You really don't like women, do you?" he taunted Sardou.

Jean-Pierre's face flushed. "I like women in their place. That's a *puta del calle*, with likely every disease carried by man or beast. Is that what you want?"

Tommy laughed. "I don't know. I'm only saying it isn't what you want, is it, even if it were ninety-nine and one hundredths percent pure?"

Sardou laughed. "You find me a woman of such purity in Havana these days, my friend, and I'll show you what I want."

They came to the street and into a raucous din of traffic. Sardou looked around, smiling, triumphant.

"Havana! The queen city of this fouled-up universe. We're here, Lavedon. One of my favorite places on this earth. Come on, despite your reluctance and your contempt, I shall make you rich."

"Funny. Every time you say that, hackles pop out across my neck."

They walked along the wide boulevard to the Hotel de Plaza, and Tommy felt the rising excitement that intoxicated Sardou. He was suddenly glad he had come along instead of wandering alone near the ship and going to bed with Lily if his desires overwhelmed him.

Sardou hailed a taxi and gave the driver the address of the Maduro barracoons. The ride through the city and into the steaming countryside was like a glimpse of a strange new universe to the fugitive from an Alabama plantation. Boston and New York and St. Louis had prepared him for the great cities, but this was unlike any of them, unlike anything he had ever seen. The narrow cobbled streets snaked through walls wild with vines and hedges and billowing trees. Whole parks blazed with scarlet hibiscus. Beyond those hedges Tommy caught sight of an occasional villa of red-tile roofing, inset windows, and thick white walls. Graceful coconut palms grew profusely, heavy with fruit, and birds of brilliant plumage spun in the glittering sunlight.

The *calesa* raced through the lush, fascinating, and ever-changing suburbs and finally left the road and entered a mammoth estate through iron gates between high brick pillars. They rode for what seemed several minutes to Tommy through carefully tended parks and drives and gleaming lawns. The coach stopped at last before a breathtaking Moorish *palacio*. The driver leaped down and held open the door for them with one hand, the other extended, palm upward, and a wide smile stretching the muscles of his dark face. "*La Casa del patron Alfonso Mendez Maduro, gracias,*" he said.

The massive front door, carved by hand of native oak, was opened by a teenaged boy who moved with mincing steps. A simpering smile distorted his rouged cheeks and mascara shadowed his limpid eyes. He invited them into the foyer with affected gestures of his limp-wristed hands, and Tommy stared coldly at Sardou and said, "What sort of nest have you gotten me into, Sardou?"

Sardou merely smiled and shrugged. "The tastes of our host are not necessarily our tastes," he said. However, Tommy was faintly shocked if not surprised when after the youth greeted Sardou warmly, they embraced fiercely and kissed upon the mouth. When Sardou released the boy, they spoke in Spanish and Sardou translated.

"Don Alfonso Maduro is having an afternoon repast after his siesta, but invites us into his informal dining room."

The boy simpered, smiling, and gestured for them to follow him. They crossed an open flowered patio, enclosed by

halls, pillars, and balconies. They reached the smallest of four dining rooms at last, where Maduro was enjoying his midafternoon snack. Meager pennants of sunlight wavered through high inset windows, flinging a careless pattern across the table where Maduro sat.

Tommy was far from impressed at his first sight of Don Maduro. He was squatting on pillows with incense bowls smoking around him. His head was totally bald and shaven, a light mahogany color marked by thick brows over soft, deep-lashed black eyes and a mustache carefully combed in the pattern of pubic hair over his pink, full-lipped mouth.

Don Maduro made no effort to rise. He greeted his guests with a curious little limp wave of his large linen napkin, which he then patted against his mouth. He said a string of smiling words and Sardou went around the heavily laden table and sank on his knees beside Maduro, taking his hand and kissing his mouth.

Sardou and Maduro spoke in rapid, excited Spanish for some moments, glancing often toward Tommy. He felt uncomfortable because obviously they were talking, with some relish, about him. Maduro kept licking at the hairs growing over his lips and then dabbing at them with his napkin. Whenever Tommy looked at the man across the table, he found Maduro staring at his crotch.

Sardou translated bits and pieces of the dialogue he exchanged with Maduro. The Don was honored to greet a distinguished American slave trader in his humble *morada.* He hoped they would deal happily and mutually profitably in the future. He looked forward to a warm friendship with *el Americano.*

"I'll bet he does," Tommy said sarcastically.

"Don Maduro also speaks perfect English," Sardou told him with a smile.

Tommy glanced toward the Cuban but found no trace of resentment in the smiling face. He insisted that Tommy have papaya and a dish of mango slices in cream. The fruit was served on Sèvres porcelain plates and black coffee was poured from a silver urn. Maduro watched him eat for a moment and then giggled, wondering aloud if there was not a slight similarity between the tangy, tart taste of the mango and that of a woman's vaginal lips.

Tommy merely shrugged. "Now that you mention it," he said.

Sardou said, "I hope you will forgive me, Don Maduro, if I am anxious to discuss our business. Our ship sails tomorrow on the tide. We have a great deal to settle."

Don Maduro smiled and nodded as Sardou laid out his plans, but did not take his soft doe's eyes from Tommy. He understood Sardou's proposition. Sardou would manage a large, if shattered plantation in Haiti's Artibonite Valley. From this place, he would dispatch Haitian blacks by the boatload to Cuba, and they would be transferred from boats to Don Maduro's barracoons. "You mentioned you would be interested in slaves in shipments of one hundred each," Sardou said.

Maduro nodded, still not taking his glazed eyes from Tommy. "That is right. I wish it this way for many reasons. There is much vandalism and piracy between here and Haiti. To lose small consignments of blacks is preferable to being robbed of large numbers. Too, it is a matter of bookkeeping. You will know how many you are shipping, at what price, and I shall know what to expect."

"I shall concentrate on the prime to fancy grade," Sardou said.

Don Maduro laughed. "From Haiti? In these starvation times? You will be lucky if you can ship me good grade to prime, my dear Sardou. Let us not deceive each other."

"I may be forced to deal in culls at first," Sardou admitted. "But we will have good food, medicine, and a doctor at Artibone Plantation. We'll fatten and sleek the animals. You'll see. My price will be high, Don Maduro, but I believe you will say it is worth it."

Don Maduro dismissed Sardou from his attention with a wave of his napkin. He smiled warmly at Tommy and stretched out his beringed hand toward him across the polished tabletop. "Are you like those other Americans I have met, Senor Lavedon?"

"In what way?" Tommy said.

"Full of enthusiasms. Promises. Animated. Impassioned. Everything they touch is the best. I remember a few years ago when I was in New Orleans. I went over to attempt to interest

slaveholders in the slaves I would guarantee to deliver through the American blockade. Every American I met had all the answers. All of them dealt only in fancy-grade blacks, and the funny part was that only one of them, some slave breeder from Alabama—I forget his name for the moment—but only he had true pure-blood fancies, the finest black flesh I ever encountered. They were everything he said they were."

"Hammond Maxwell," Sardou said.

Don Maduro jerked his entranced gaze from Tommy's profile, as if rudely awakened, and then nodded his head, smiling. "Of course . . . Senor Maxwell. Of Falconhurst."

The words clutched at Tommy's heart like icy tongs. Falconhurst. Maxwell. He realized Don Maduro was speaking to him. Had he ever heard of the great Falconhurst Plantation?

"Oh, yes," Tommy said, forcing his voice to remain casual. "I suppose everybody in Alabama knows the famous Falconhurst brand of blacks. The finest bred in the country." Tommy decided it was safe, six hundred miles south, to admit his association with the famous source of purebred slaves. Surely, not even Ham Maxwell would pursue a fugitive slave to Cuba and Haiti. Or would he . . . ?

He was relieved when Sardou brought the conversation back to the manner of payment he could expect. Since he did not totally trust Don Maduro, he told the slave dealer to his face, he would work better for cash in reals, paid in advance.

Maduro laughed at him. "Of course you would. But since I do not trust you, either, my dear Sardou, I believe we shall be forced to depend on the method of payment I use for all my outside sources. I shall place payment in escrow in the National Bank of Havana. When your shipment is received here, the money will be released, placed in your account, or sent wherever you wish."

Tommy could not escape a queasy feeling deep in his stomach when he listened to these two men so casually discuss the trade in black flesh as if the slaves were animals, less than animals. He had never suspected that Sardou was burdened with any sense of ethics or morals, and this dialogue between the traders proved his darkest suspicions. It was one thing to offer for sale, and to agree to buy, slaves from Africa, because God knew the tribes themselves dealt in

slavery, enslaving and exporting neighboring tribespeople. But Haiti was a black nation where blacks had revolted, fought, and bled for their freedom. The devastated country was governed, even if not competently, by blacks. Yet Sardou was coldly planning to go into Haiti and set up a slave-shipping operation linked to Cuba, people as free as Sardou or Maduro, who had been free since they followed Henri Christophe into battle earlier in the century.

Again, Maduro had turned his full attention and the smoldering fires of his deep-lashed eyes upon Tommy. "Senor Sardou says that you, too, shall be managing a Haitian plantation, Don Paul. Perhaps I could work out the same arrangement for a steady supply of black flesh from you as I have made with our dear mutual friend, Sardou."

"I don't know if slave trading interests me, Don Maduro," Tommy said.

"Perhaps a friendly and thorough discussion of the liberality of my terms will help you make up your mind, Don Paul," Don Maduro suggested.

Tommy had a chary feeling about Maduro's invitation. The cajolery in the velvet tone conveyed carnal associations. This suspicion was quickly reinforced when Sardou got to his feet abruptly, pleading an important business engagement downtown which prevented his remaining any longer in this delightful company. Tommy watched in amazement as Sardou kissed Maduro and two of his painted, simpering boy-servants good-bye and disappeared from the room and from the *castillo*. Tommy sat uncomfortably, watching his simpering host.

Maduro heaved a deep sigh of pleasure, as if he were relieved and delighted by Sardou's departure. He spread his manicured hands on his thighs and caressed himself in a loving way. He was so excited that Tommy was not hurried, that he might prolong his visit, that they might come to know each other well.

Tommy was not particularly disturbed by Maduro, or even Maduro's ardent desire to know him well. At the moment Tommy reserved all the deep wells of his hatred for Jean-Pierre Sardou. Damn him. The son of a bitch had set him up for this uncomfortable situation. It was Sardou's idea of revenge for Tommy's having allowed Sardou to believe Lily

was a nubile young boy. Whether he and Sardou reached any business arrangement on the matter of shipping and buying slaves was unimportant to Sardou. How that bastard must be raging with laughter right now because he had Tommy where he wanted him.

"I may as well tell you, I am new at this," Tommy said. "I'll be a stranger in Haiti. I cannot promise to enslave or sell you any blacks. I think maybe you are wasting your time, Don Maduro."

"No time spent in such pleasant company is ever wasted." Don Maduro slapped his soft hands together and three mascara-painted, nude boys appeared.

Maduro ordered cold drinks served, a mixture, he explained in English to Tommy, of fruit juices and rum, a liquor distilled from the sugarcane.

Tommy found the tall, cold liquid pleasant. He sipped it while he watched Maduro making preparations in Spanish for some sort of entertainment. The nude boys brought ropes and chains and placed them about upon a dais which was revealed when huge pillows were removed and stacked in a corner. Maduro clapped his hands again, gave Tommy a warm, glazed smile and sank deeper in his pillows. He patted the pillows beside him. "You'll be more comfortable to watch the show, which will be dedicated to you, Don Paul."

Tommy thanked him, but remained where he was. He found that even if he'd wanted to move nearer the bald man, it required too much effort to move. The rum had a soothing effect that almost stunned him.

Don Maduro sighed expansively and then with a little grimace of sadness summoned one of the nude and painted serving boys. Maduro motioned the youth to kneel before him. He slowly ran his soft hands down over the back of the boy's shoulders and down his upper arms, languid and almost detached, watching Tommy's face rather than the boy between his legs. Tommy saw Maduro slip a hand under each moist armpit and caress the boy's pectoral muscles and his copper-penny paps. As he petted the youth, he continued to gaze at Tommy in that impassive way, with just the hint of a smile tugging at his pink, hair-fringed mouth.

There was no doubting what Maduro had in mind for

himself and his guest. Well, no sense in letting it go on too long. Without further delay, Tommy smiled warmly and shook his head. "I'm afraid you're making a little mistake here, Don Maduro."

"Mistake, Don Paul? In what way?"

As they spoke, the tableaus began on the small stage, played out to the accompaniment of sensual Spanish guitars from unseen musicians. A half dozen nude young males, none more than twenty, all physically perfect specimens and variegated colors, from deep chocolate to pale beige, performed nude in every sexual technique known to aberration and erotica. Each of them carried what appeared to be an eternal state of erection—all proud staff bearers—and every movement was carefully choreographed, like a ballet.

Don Maduro gave only token attention to the performers. His bland gaze was fixed on Tommy, his eyes wandering along his profile and throat to his chest and his thighs.

"I am an acquaintance of Jean-Pierre Sardou's. But only an acquaintance. Perhaps you have drawn an incorrect inference from our apparent friendship. My tastes are not compatible with those of Jean-Pierre Sardou's."

"Forget Jean-Pierre," Maduro said. "It is you I care about. I can do great things for you. And I want to. Aye God, I do . . . If we were friends, Don Paul, I could make you rich."

"Rich?"

"How does fifty thousand reals for every shipment of one hundred slaves from Haiti sound to you, my dear young friend?"

"Confusing."

"Confusing, Senor?"

Tommy shook his head, trying to clear away the cobwebs suddenly cluttering his thought processes. "Everything is confused right now, Don Maduro. Especially you."

"I assure you I wish in no way to confuse or puzzle you, dear Don Paul. Far from it. I have only the warmest feelings toward you."

Tommy nodded. "And it is from that premise that all error flows, Don Maduro. I like women. I'm sorry if you misunderstood."

"Oh, there's no misunderstanding, my dear boy. Many

men believe they worship femininity, until they taste the true religion—"

"Well, I'm afraid I'm too far gone now, Don Maduro, ever to be a real convert."

Don Maduro smiled and inclined his head toward the stage where a black boy buggered a beige one to the cries of the boy, the watching chorus, and the guitars. "Let us try a baptism, and see, Don Paul. Perhaps you will find yourself an anxious devotee."

"You have the entirely wrong perception of me," Tommy said, still gazing at the stage, words slurring.

"Oh, no. That I do not have, Don Paul. You are the loveliest creature I have ever encountered. I am maddened with desire for you. Jean-Pierre said only that you are hung like a young stud." Maduro licked his lips, his eyes glazed. "And for myself I have perceived perfection in you. You have the most beautiful ass I have ever seen. . . . I dream forward only to that moment when I can kiss your body, every inch of your beautiful body, with avid, greedy hunger."

Tommy attempted to go on smiling. By now the room wheeled and skidded around him, the stage and its players came close and then receded wildy. "Before this gets out of hand and one of us does something he will regret, I'd better leave, Don Maduro."

"Leave?" Maduro licked his mouth. "It's all arranged. You will leave in the morning. My coachmen will return you to your ship well ahead of its departure."

"Sorry to disappoint you," Tommy said. "I'm leaving now."

As Tommy tried to get to his feet, a curious change came over Don Maduro. His soft face seemed to harden, and his soft eyes glittered craftily. "I am afraid not, dear friend. It is all arranged. By the drug in the rum. You will be fully recovered in the morning, perhaps with a slight headache. In the meantime, you are not going anywhere. As they say in your New Orleans during the yellow fever epidemics, just relax and enjoy it."

"While you ream me a new asshole, my friend? I am sorry, Don Maduro. I'm just not that kind of boy."

He tried to move, but for a long time, while the music and the tableaus and the softly watching eyes of Don Maduro

caressed him he could not force a reflex in his muscles. He was helpless to move without assistance; it was as if he were a glob of warm pudding, without bone structure or tendons. His mouth opened, but no words came. He forced himself to clench his fists. Once he accomplished this impossible task, the rest was comparatively easy. He constricted his sphincter recti muscles.

Holding himself tautly contracted, he forced himself slowly to his feet. Maduro watched incredulous, his face decomposing into despair, tears welling in his limpid eyes and rolling down his peach-down cheeks. A somber sob shook his slender body, but he did not move, he did not speak. He sat, waiting for Tommy to fall flat on his face.

Tommy gave them all a slight, tightly controlled bow, a gesture of farewell. He turned and wobbled across the room, along the corridors to the pillared arches. He told himself when he finally reached the patio the fountain-freshened cool air would revive him. But he was wrong about that.

It took an eternity, but he crossed the patio and entryway, letting himself out of the luxurious castle.

He kept himself furiously under physical control, constricting and gripping all his muscles and laboriously forcing action from them with repeated messages from his scrambled nerve centers. He knew only one thing: if he relaxed a single muscle, even one small sinew, he would not get out of here until a sated Maduro permitted him to leave.

His head reared back at an odd angle and he stumbled along the drive to the darkened street. He turned in the direction he hoped led toward downtown Havana. He took long, controlled steps, almost falling and then catching his balance at the last minute.

A carriage approached from the rear. He set himself, clenching his jaw and digging his nails into his palms, and waved his arms. He saw that it was a public hack. The *calesa* attempted to pull out and go around him.

Tommy screamed in outrage, but no sound came from his mouth. He forced himself to run. He managed to catch on to the door of the hack. When the driver saw he was not going to let go, could not, in fact, now that he'd gripped the metal handle, he stopped. Tommy sprawled into the floor of the

cab. *"Por favor,"* he managed to whisper. *"Lo puerto Havana. La nave, Sainte Genevieve. Agradas. Agradas."*

The hack raced through the darkness. Tommy was barely aware of where he was. Lights and shadows and sounds spun and skidded and raged around him. He went on holding himself in fierce control. If he relaxed for a moment, he was lost.

He heard a rattling of wheels and hooves on great plankings and finally the coach stopped. He pushed himself to his feet. He threw bills at the driver. He gazed up at the *St. Genevieve*. He took three long steps toward its gangplank, then plunged forward into warm, soft, deep, and total darkness.

XVI

Sardou laughed wildly.

His face came close, indistinct features magnified and twisted out of shape with that insensate laughter, then it receded, spinning away into the dim distance, a small dot on a shattered horizon. But the quality and savagery of his laughter never diminished; it spewed over Tommy like breakers on a shore.

Tommy pushed himself up slowly upon his bunk. The mattress was insubstantial under him and the cabin flew and fluttered and wavered around him: faces, objects, bulkheads, porthole, hatches, and always that unrelenting laughter from everywhere, echoing and reverberating inside his skull.

He slumped for a long time, clinging on to the side rails until Lily stopped flying like a nervous pigeon about the room. He told her to bring him a pitcher of cold water. When she brought it, he took long draughts from its mouth, then poured the rest over his head.

Sardou's laughter swelled even louder, raging like something malignant.

"Damn you," Tommy muttered. "I want you to get out of here."

"Why?" Sardou managed to ask.

"For your own safety. If you stay, you bastard, I'll kill you."

Sardou yelled with new laughter. "Wasn't dear Don Maduro nice to you?"

"You bastard."

Sardou shrugged. "Well, *mon ami*, now we're even."

Tommy shuddered with outrage. "We'll never be even. If you don't get out now I will kill you with my bare hands."

"That's not a very gracious attitude," Sardou taunted.

"Gracious? I should thank you for leaving me in a nest of painted men?"

"If you want to thank me, of course."

"Get out!"

"Mr. Sardou is the one who found you, at the foot of the gangplank, Mastuh," Lily said. "He brought you on his shoulder to your cabin. You knew nothing. It was like you were dead."

Tommy exhaled heavily. "All right. I owe Sardou that much. Then I'll let him out of here alive. This once. But with this warning, you conniving bastard. If you come near me again before we get to Haiti, I will kill you. And I'll keep killing you until you get it through your thick skull that I hate your guts."

"But we're so much alike," Sardou protested. "We could be such great friends."

Tommy looked as if he might vomit. "We're nothing alike, you limp-wristed fop. If I thought I were like you, I'd kill myself. Get out. I never want to see your simpering face again."

Sardou left, shaking his head, but still laughing. "I swear I never saw a man with so little sense of humor left." He paused at the door. He held his face expressionless. He spoke over his shoulder. "Did you lose your virginity, too?"

Sardou kept his distance for at least one hour. In that hot, sweated time, Tommy slowly recovered. His head felt as if it were bursting; he reeked sourly of rum, and when he had the strength he cursed Sardou and his family back six generations. He would never forgive the son of a bitch.

The bed was like a hotbed of coals; he could not go on lying there, suffering passively. He forced himself to swing his legs over the side of his bunk. This incredible feat having been achieved, he stretched his legs out in front of him and focused his eyes on them until they took solid shape. After a long time he cautiously tested his weight on those clabbery pillars. He managed to stagger the few halting steps to the porthole. He threw it open and stuck his head out into the

cold wind. It was true! He still lived, still had the faint spark of a will to live.

Lily helped to dress him, and he was buttoning a fresh white shirt when the door opened unceremoniously and Sardou stood there. He carried a bowl of ice. "From the captain's own stock," he said.

Iced water revived him, and for this one decent action he almost forgave Sardou. But he saw it did not matter whether he forgave him or not. Sardou had attached himself, like a leech, and he would not escape him for the balance of the voyage. The hell with it. What more harm could the bastard do aboard a ship?

The sea lay milk-blue and lime-green, fringed with cerise and orange and scalloped with gray thunderheads along a turbulent horizon. Tommy and Sardou sprawled high on the forward deck, bathing in the blaze of the imperiled sun. They wore only white duck pants hacked off above their knees; their bodies were sweated, oily, seared. The *St. Genevieve* ran lazily before the wind, sailing a fixed course to leeward, the wind coming from directly astern or no more than a point or two off of it. They were a day south and east of Havana and the tropical sun blistered Sardou's fair skin, but he would not complain, move to the tatters of shade, or admit to agony. "The darker my skin, the better they'll like me, the more they'll trust me, where we're going," was all he said. Then he added, "Hope you're not looking for ease, or even a trace of civilization down in Haiti, old friend."

Tommy shrugged and lay with his arms under his head. "I pity any of those poor bastards who trust you."

"You've got to stop wasting your pity on ignorant black animals, Lavedon. They are ignorant. The French kept them that way because they were easier to handle as long as they had their voodoo and enough to eat and knew nothing of reading and writing and francs. I imagine my friend Emperor Zaccone will continue that policy. It's the only one that makes sense."

"Maybe if somebody tried to help them—"

"Help them?" Sardou hooted with laughter. "Wait until you see them. You'll know they are beyond help. And Zaccone didn't take over the country to help anyone but himself."

"How do you know that?"

"Because I know Don Juan Zaccone. He's a bloody murderer, that's what he is. He led in the revolt on white people. Then when the Indians got in his way, he killed their women and children, hacked their heads off and left them to rot in the sun. This is no Eden you're going into, old fellow. It's what's left of a backward country after twenty-five years of unadulterated hell."

"Then why do you go there?"

"You heard what I told our mutual admirer Don Maduro, didn't you? I'm going there to get rich. Shipping slaves. If you're smart, you'll do the same. Take what you can. Job it through Maduro. Get rich and run like hell."

The sun was suddenly gone, the wind freshened to twenty knots, the thick clouds reflected in the swollen, throbbing surface of the sea. It was as if trouble had been waiting for the sun to fail. A cry came from the crow's nest. "Ship. Hard to larboard."

Already a shabby gang of seamen clustered at the larboard railings, gazing at the approaching vessel. Aft and forward, other men abandoned their posts and stared at the ship racing between them and landfall, and cutting at a long angle clearly calculated to bring her dead across the bow of the *St. Genevieve*. There was an unmistakable sense of urgency in the oncoming craft, its canvas filled; it was no ordinary brig passing casually in the trade lanes. As it neared, its motives if not its name identified it. It was the sort of sea raider that lay in wait, like white sharks in these waters, a tall-masted brigantine sporting topgallants and every foot of sails bellied to the wind.

"That looks like the ship we spotted near the Dry Tortugas," Tommy said.

Sardou nodded, eyes chilled. "Been tracking us, waiting to get us south of Cuba."

Close-hauled as Killinsworth ran his schooner, the *St. Genevieve*, its sprit staysails trimmed and mizzen-reefed, appeared to lay almost at anchor before the pursuer.

Without a word, Sardou levered himself to his feet and ran to the nearest ladder going toward the wheelhouse. Tommy joined him, running with him across the poop deck.

When Sardou flung the door open, both the captain and the

helmsman heeled around, the sailor gray-faced, the master flushed and raging. "What ye lubbers a-doin' in my presence half naked like this? Get out of here, Mr. Sardou, and take your friend with you."

Sardou ignored the captain's order. "You're letting that blackbirder overtake you without a struggle."

"You lubbin' idiot. I got my canvas out full. What you ask of me?"

"That you don't endanger my life—at least without making a run for it."

"I see no blackbirder in the first place. I see another freighter, with as much right to the roads as I have. An' if it was a raider as you imagine, Mr. Sardou, what makes you think I could outrun her—if I were of the nervous-Nelly disposition like you?"

"You could try," Sardou raged, staring toward the hard-running ship coming across the wind, reaching for her highest speeds and seeming to slash through the choppy waves. "You're close-hauled, and at least four points off the wind."

"Ah, a seasoned seaman are you suddenly, Mr. Sardou?"

"Put up all your canvas," Sardou said without taking his eyes from the ship closing in from starboard. "Tack! Fill your sails. You can still outrun her if you reach broad to windward."

"Aye . . . Only this be my ship, Mr. Sardou. This be my responsibility. Its crew and its cargo and its safety. I run her as I see. . . . And I say, even if you were right that we're facin' a blackbirder, we'll only be sunk if we try to run."

Sardou cursed the captain. "You stupid old pirate. You'll be sunk anyhow. Or sold to some sultan as slave to be sodomized, if you let them take you. Ah, how those dark heathens love fat asses like yours. And you can stop playing coy. That's a blackbirder on our starboard. I've seen craft like her before."

"I got my ship and my cargo to think about," Killinsworth said.

"And I got my skin," Sardou said. "And I mean to fight to keep it intact. And if your owners ever learn the truth about how you allowed yourself to be taken—"

"Get out of here," the captain yelled, his face flushed and his body quaking.

"Let them take you," Tommy said. "That's your decision, Captain. You're right about that. But I'll fight them. I won't be taken—to be sold into slavery—or impressed to duty on some British man-o-war."

"My words exactly," Sardou said.

"You're passengers aboard my ship." The captain gasped for breath in his outrage. "You make one move to disobey me, or endanger my ship and my cargo, and I'll put you both in irons. You make one move to disturb the tranquility or imperil the safety of this here freighter and I'll order ye shot."

"Start bellowing your orders, Captain. The quicker you let your crew know your intent, the sooner I'll have men to fight beside me," Sardou said.

Tommy laughed. "As for your irons, Captain. I'd as soon be in yours as theirs."

As if the *St. Genevieve* stood becalmed on the rising swells, the brig sailed in upon her like a mastiff overtaking a terrier. Big guns bristled, their snouts visible along the top plankings of the square-rigger.

Sardou gave Killinsworth one last challenging glance. When the captain glared up at him from narrowed eyes wet in their sockets, Sardou heeled and ran from the wheelhouse. Tommy followed, the skipper hurling curses and threats in their wake. Sardou ran to the railing along the poop deck and shouted at the seamen gathered below him.

"Arm yourselves, men," Sardou yelled from the poop deck. "The captain means to let us be boarded by those privateers. You've got one chance. Fight for your lives or be taken into slavery."

Men sprang from the railings and bulkheads to obey him, arming themselves with cutlasses and small arms that somehow made them look more pathetic than ever as the blackbirder sent its first salvos across the main deck.

Sardou glanced toward the captain on the poop deck and then shouted across his shoulder toward Tommy. "We've put the fear of God, at least, in old Killinsworth! The old bastard is afraid one of us might live to talk. . . . He's ordered the *St. Genevieve* turned down the wind and he's ordered up more canvas."

"Hell, it's too late for that."

"Aye. But you don't read him right, old son. This last-minute run is nothing but window dressing. . . . Make himself look good at court-martial . . . Now nobody can ever say he didn't *try* to run for his life."

As new canvas spanked upward on the four masts and bellied out reaching across the wind, the ship lunged, leaped, and plunged like a sailfish through the high-rising waves, racing at a hard tack out to sea to fill every furling sail.

The blackbirder showed no colors, whatever flag she may have flaunted earlier. The brig veered a few points to compensate and to intercept its prey.

Tommy could see the skipper, slumped against the bulkhead behind them, watching the end of the race in an almost detached way, coldly seeing his ship run down, overtaken, and entrapped.

Around them, seamen ran to their battle stations with musketry as effective as toys against the cannons belching fire and death and destruction from the brigantine.

"The gold cannon," Tommy said, shouting into the wind.

Sardou stared at him, nodded, and then put his head back, laughing. "You think it's meant to be fired in anger?"

"If it's got a hole in its end and a lanyard, we'll fire it."

Sardou led the way at a run, roaring with laughter. They ripped away the protective covering, exposing the golden weapon—scrolled and polished and gleaming.

Sardou patted her shiny surface. "We might as well blow her to smithereens—if those pirates get their paws on her, Emperor Don Juan won't ever glimpse it anyhow."

A skinny seaman, naked to the belt and barefoot, threw aside his musket and leaped to help them roll the golden carronade into place and snub it down. "Be a gunner by profession," he said. A second seaman brought cannonballs and powder. Another stood with linstock ready.

All this time, in an agony of frustration and rage, Captain Killinsworth screamed in impotent fury from the poop deck, his voice fragmented on the wind, lost and carried away in the blackbirder's cannoning.

Thunder blasted from the attacker's brigantine and a cannonball sailed low across the bow of the *St. Genevieve.*

This warning shot was all Killinsworth required of his

adversary. "Heave to," the skipper ordered through his megaphone.

Sardou laughed, raging. "Listen to that treacherous old bastard. He fights slow and surrenders fast, if in no way furious."

Tommy shouted at the skinny gunner and he fetched buckets of nails, bolts, and screws. "Personnel killer," Tommy said to an admiring Sardou.

"You savage bastard," Sardou said approvingly. "We'll feed them grapeshot as well as cannonballs. You been in these fights before?"

Tommy laughed coldly. "I know we've got one chance and just one. We can fire this thing maybe once. They'll blow us out of the sea before we can fire her again—if we don't do the job ourselves. We're dead anyway unless we can make our one shot count."

Tommy jerked his head. The seamen lashed down the cannon, blocking and tying it off as securely as possible on the pitching and yawing deck. The gunner stood with linstock at the ready.

"We're only going to make them mad anyhow," Sardou agreed. "Your personnel killer may be our only hope. A few well-placed killings might take the heart out of them."

Tommy drew a deep breath, held his hand aloft. Another roar sounded and a splintering crash meant a mainmast had been struck. The brig tacked in boldly now, big guns poised, crew waiting along the railings to board the freighter.

Tommy waited as the *St. Genevieve* rode upward with the swells and then plunged downward into the trough. "Be ready," Tommy told the gunner.

The *St. Genevieve* tilted, rode high and crested on a wave. Another fusilade and the deafening roar of a direct, close-at-hand cannonade. As the freighter plunged, nose down, Tommy slashed downward with his arm and yelled, "Now!"

Incredibly, the incoming brig shuddered under the suddenness and crippling fury of the blow. The shot struck the superstructure, which blazed instantaneously with fire. Along the bulkheads men screamed in mortal agony, their bodies ripped and torn by scrap metal. Some staggered and fell, bloody on the decks, a few pitched between the railings, carried dead out to sea.

Men aboard the *St. Genevieve* yelled their snarling triumph. Chaos briefly halted all aggression aboard the attacker. Its officers roared contradictory orders and its company wandered hurt and dying in the flares of fires on her blood-smeared deck.

Tommy concentrated on the small gold cannon. The weapon had weathered its maiden strike. There was only one way to find out if it could withstand a second explosion. They loaded her with cannonball, nails, screws, metal, and powder charge. As they worked in obsessed silence, the blackbirder renewed its attack, firing its cannons in brutal retaliation, many of her hasty shots going wide of their mark.

Tommy signaled and his men awaited his order to fire. Again, the freighter crested a churning wave and once more plunged nose downward into the trough. On this falling motion of the ship, Tommy ordered the cannon fired again.

The lanyard sizzled, the gold weapon roared, acrid smoke clouded over them. The weapon shook, trembled, but held intact, rocking back against its lashing.

It all ended suddenly. The second shot from the gold cannon was a direct hit. The personnel-killing metal took a fearful toll of the men left standing on the brig's open deck. The cannonball ripped into a powder magazine. An explosion shook the blackbirder to her pegs. Her gun crews went into panic. They abandoned the great guns facing the *St. Genevieve* and dove for cover in the bulwarks. Officers raged at them and beat them with belaying pins and musket butts, trying to force them back to their stations, but the seamen ran in agonized circles, some of them mortally wounded, the others filled with dread at what was happening around them. They dug in under any cover. The brave among them abandoned everything else to fight the fires spreading in the superstructure. In that brief delay, as if caught on some driving wind astern, the freighter glided away from the fire-blasted brigantine.

The pirate ship wallowed helplessly, drifting, burning. Screams and agonized sobs trailed across the rising swells to the running freighter.

As the *St. Genevieve* rode away on the wind from the smoking brig, Tommy ran to the fantail. He stood there, legs apart to brace himself, and stared back at the wounded ship.

The brig quivered and blazed, the conflict forgotten as lifeboats were frantically winched out.

Around him, along the open decks, seamen growled their savage exultation. Tommy remained where he was. The brigantine had abandoned the chase, quit the fight and luffed alee to fight flames on deck, or take to lifeboats. Her fires ebbed and then rose and flames licked upward through vast-spread shrouds, taking a final toll. Black smoke curled upward, bending and twisting on the wind, and she drifted in circles like some mindless, wounded animal.

From the bridge, Captain Killinsworth's voice roared, magnified through a megaphone, summoning Sardou and Lavedon to the captain's housing, on the double.

Tommy turned to obey. For the first time he noticed that Sardou stood, devil-may-care, smoke-streaked, eyes wild with laughter, bared to the chopped-off shorts, at his side. Sardou touched Tommy's arm. "Just a second, old mate. We can't go into the captain's august presence in this state. We must bathe and dress formal for the occasion."

Smiling, Tommy agreed, admiring the convoluted workings of Sardou's strange mind. He returned to his cabin, washed up as best he could, and with Lily's assistance, dressed in his formal best.

Sardou knocked on his door. The Delta social lion was shaven, brushed, and polished in freshly pressed suit with ruffled shirt and shining boots. "My appearance will help me to look in contempt on the old bastard."

Sardou and Tommy strode along the decks, going up to the bridge and into the wheelhouse where the sweated captain awaited them in a state verging on apoplexy. "You two bastards," he snarled. "Ye not only countermand me orders, even when you obey them, ye mock me."

"You have this way of bringing out the best in us, Captain," Sardou said.

"You son of a bitch. I'm putting you two in irons."

"Do you mind saying why?" Sardou inquired, shooting his laced cuff and dabbing at his nostrils with a silk kerchief. "Perhaps for saving your hide?"

"For going against me orders, Mister. For endangering my ship and my men."

"Come now, Skipper." Sardou laughed. "I know you love

your ship. But your men? You'd feed them to the sharks and sleep soundly that same night."

"Next, you'll be sayin' I ought to thank you." Killinsworth's voice trembled.

Sardou stuck his tongue in his cheek and winked at Tommy. "Exactly the reason why we came all dressed up to see you, Skipper. To be properly received as proper heroes we must be dressed properly. We have come to be thanked—Mr. Lavedon especially—for a job well done, far over and above the call of duty."

"Call of duty! Job well done, is it?" Killinsworth looked as if he might weep in helpless frustration. "I think ye are a couple blackbirders yourselves. Mincing around so prim and respectable. Thanks you're lookin' for, is it? Well, me lubbers, you'll be standin' there with a beard to the floor, your backs bent and hell froze over before you hear a word of thanks from me."

XVII

To Tommy's amazement, Sardou was returned at once into Captain Killinsworth's good graces. He was drinking with the skipper in the master's cabin that very night. It was as if no tensions, mistrust, or ill-feelings had ever existed between them.

Sardou got so soddenly and totally drunk that by midnight seamen carried him to his own stateroom. Sardou slumped in upon himself, helpless, as if the liquor had liquefied his bones and turned his tendons to jelly. He sang filthy songs, he laughed without reason and giggled like a girl. When the sailors tried to set him on his feet, he was unable to stand alone.

However, he was up and on deck ahead of Tommy the next morning. In fact, both Tommy and Lily still slept when Jean-Pierre banged on the stateroom door. Lily swung down sleepily from the top bunk and padded across the narrow crib in a state of semiconsciousness. She opened the hatch and stood yawning and shaking her head.

"Wake up, Lavedon." Sardou stuck his head in the open doorway. "No time to loll around. Meet me on deck. Five minutes."

Tommy sat up, shaking his head. Sardou grinned at him, nodded in a conspiratorial way, winked and then withdrew, slamming the door behind him. Puzzled, Tommy swung his legs over the side of his bunk, still yawning and scratching at his ribs.

Within ten minutes he was beside Sardou on the port side, aft. He found the Delta fop leaning against the railing and

staring into the hard-running sea as if the water held the secret of existence for him.

Sardou heeled around. He jerked his head, motioning Tommy to follow, and set off striding briskly aft.

Tommy fell into step beside him. "What's this all about?"

Sardou grinned at him. "About you and me, friend. And what the skipper has in store for us, what his plans must have been. What they are and what we can do about it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Us. Listen well. I can say it only once. The bulkheads have ears. We walk all the way aft. To the very point of the fantail. Won't look amiss, as long as we look as if we're laughing and joking, with nothing on our minds. Laugh a lot. Makes no difference if what I say is nothing to laugh about, you laugh anyhow. Laugh big and put your head back with your laughing. Look as if you are enjoying yourself before breakfast."

"I seldom laugh out loud before breakfast."

Sardou roared with laughter at this and clapped Tommy on the back. But he spoke in a desperate tone. "I suppose you've already guessed that Captain Killinsworth had a deal on with that blackbirder, whoever he was, to let him board the *St. Genevieve*? Laugh it up."

Tommy put his head back laughing. He said, "I know he didn't exactly thank us for upsetting his plans."

Sardou laughed and nodded. They saw Killinsworth watching from the poop deck and they waved carelessly and kept walking. "His plans included letting that blackbirder make off with something that's aboard this ship, something of such immense value that it's hidden somewhere—under lock and key."

Tommy laughed. "The cannon maybe?"

"Oh, hell, no. I'm talking incredible riches, man. I have no idea what value and I have no idea what it might be. I know only that Killinsworth's deal was to let the blackbirder steal it—and somewhere they'd divide the take."

"Only we fouled it up."

"That's right. I don't know his plans for us now. Maybe you and I and your slave were meant as a bonus for the privateer. But we had no importance at all compared with whatever is hidden on this ship."

"And he hates us worse than ever because we ruined his deal?"

"And that's only part of it. The blackbirder came in on us expecting not even a token protest from the *St. Genevieve*. That's why I believe the skipper meant for you and me and your slave to be taken. If there was an inquiry, we might have spoken against him. But his crew are such criminals that not one of them would be allowed to testify. So he meant to get rid of us, too."

Sardou laughed uproariously and prodded Tommy, urging him to laughter. "But that's all past. The old boy is not one to carry a grudge—especially when he's got bigger sharks chomping at his ass."

"The blackbirder thinks Killinsworth crossed him."

"Aye. And now Killinsworth can't run far enough or fast enough to escape his former partners. They'll be after his heart and his hide now. They'll cut out his gizzard and strip away his skin. He's gut sick with what he knows now. There's no rat hole deep enough for him to crawl into. . . . Oh, they're after him. He told them they could come in on him without a shot fired, and when they edged boldly up to us, we filled their decks with shrapnel and grapeshot. We put a ball into a powder keg, we set their ship to flames . . ."

"And they think it's his doing—his betrayal."

"Aye. Captain Killinsworth's life is forfeit—from this minute. Oh, that blackbirder is back there—limping slightly, crippled a little, but on Killinsworth's trail with savage madness. . . . Nothing more righteous than another criminal who thinks you've choused him."

"Does Killinsworth mean to kill us?"

Sardou laughed, but shook his head. They were far out on the fantail now, the wind fresh and chill about them, a new sun splattering their wake with silver. "That wouldn't buy him anything now, I think. The captain is looking ahead, not back. No, the captain's got but one thing on his mind now. He hates us both, but killing us wouldn't profit him and profit is all that moves him. Oh, he wants to be rid of us. He means to stay no longer in port at Cap Francois than necessary to take on fresh water and provisions—and then run again, to buy himself some time."

"You think we're safe for the time being?"

"I think so. But it's not our safety that I'm studying now with all my mind, friend."

Tommy forced a broad laugh for the benefit of any watching eyes, but he stared into Sardou's face, puzzled. "What are you thinking?"

"About that treasure. Hidden riches aboard this ship . . . It's got to be a fortune beyond your wildest imagination. Enough so that if Killinsworth split it with the blackbirder, he'd still live fancy as a king to the end of his days—no matter if his owners wrested the *St. Genevieve* from him and denied him his papers as a skipper for the rest of his natural life . . . and that could well have happened. Killinsworth had to figure that in the possible cost. Whatever the odds against him in this double cross, he went into it willing—and only you and I messed up his plans."

"We still have our skins. I say we debark this ship as the captain permits and thank the gods we're alive and out of slavery."

"That's all very well for you to say, because you haven't given it any thought. Those same gods who helped to keep you out of slavery and alive, you think they wouldn't be most happy to see you rich as a lord, as well?"

Now Tommy did laugh, honestly and openly.

"Those gods help those who help themselves," Sardou said. "I say we take that treasure—whatever it is. We relieve the captain of it. He meant to lose it to undeserving blackbirders—"

"Who would have split it with him."

"Who *might* have split it with him. I've never heard of any pirate I'd trust as far as I could spit—excepting you. They might have split with the captain. We'll never know. And I could not care less. I know I won't."

"You mean to take his treasure from him—and leave him a ruined man—with his owners, with his ex-partners that he might still buy off, if he had the treasure when they catch him—with whoever the stuff is consigned to?"

Sardou shrugged. "This is business we're talking, Lavedon. And there's no place in business for sentiment. Killinsworth had nothing against you or me—yet he meant to see us taken by that blackbirder, just to insure the safety of his own hide. Is that sentimental? Maybe you don't need money. But I do. I

need all I can get my hands on. If you want to help me take that treasure—which Killinsworth would have lost anyway—I'll vow you my equal partner. Fifty-fifty, though I thought of this myself and have already done much of the spadework."

Tommy laughed loudly and slapped Sardou on the shoulder. "Now what are you talking about? What spadework?"

"Last night. I got the skipper passed-out drunk. And that's not easy, because I've little tolerance for alcohol myself. It acts on my system like poison. But I also have a formidable willpower. And I put it to work last night—along with a few drops of laudanum to help lull the captain to sleep. I made the first search for whatever it was the captain planned to turn over to the blackbirder. . . . It is not in his cabin, I can swear to that."

"You any idea where it is?"

"Not the foggiest notion. That's where you come in. That's why you are worth a two-way split of the fortune. You've got to find it. You've got to steal it. That's all you've got to do."

Tommy put his head back, laughing loudly. "Is that all? And what will you be doing?"

"The hardest part, my friend, that's what. Drinking with the captain. Keeping the old skipper occupied and suspecting nothing while you find the treasure."

Tommy shook his head. "You make it sound so easy."

"It is easy when you compare it to outdrinking the captain when alcohol is a poison to your brain and your liver and your kidneys. . . . But there is just one other little matter."

"Yes?"

"Time. Time is what we've got none of. We stand somewhere off the Haitian coast. The captain will be putting into Cap Francois within the next day or so. Time is what's against us. Time's our enemy. Time is what is running out on us."

Tommy spent the day prowling the ship. There was little in his casual demeanor to arouse the suspicions of even a naturally mistrustful man like Captain Killinsworth. The derelict crew cheered Tommy on sight. They gripped his hand, excessive in their praise and approval as they thanked him for saving their hides.

Killinsworth saw the ceremonies, but concluded that Tommy

was being showered with due homage, and that he wandered the decks and companionways and even the holds below decks to escape discomfiting displays of commendation from the seamen.

All Tommy gained from his prowling was the sure knowledge that no treasure existed on the ship, or that the captain had concealed it so cleverly that only Killinsworth himself could have led the blackbirders to it had they succeeded in boarding the *St. Genevieve*.

The afternoon waned. The *St. Genevieve* sailed toward land, going west by south across the warming waters.

Tommy stood at the railings watching the sea, the first gulls, and the thunderheads boiling along the horizon. Occasionally he glanced aft, almost expecting that brigantine to have regrouped and come in deadly pursuit. The sea lay calm and empty.

How cleverly could Killinsworth have hidden a chest of any dimensions large enough to contain a fortune of anything? Or was the hidden fortune merely a figment of Sardou's fevered imagination? As Jean-Pierre had admitted, he needed money, all he could get his hands upon. Was his need the mother of his invention? Did he believe a fortune existed because he wanted it with such obsession?

Then Tommy considered himself. Was he perhaps giving Killinsworth credit for too much cunning? There was not any doubt that the skipper was a clever, maliciously smart and dangerously knowing man. But suppose he had a chest large enough to conceal? Would he stop to be clever about it? Or would he be merely practical? He stood a long time thinking about this. Then, smiling, suddenly coldly calm, he went down a hatchway to the corridor along which his own stateroom and those of Sardou and any other potential passengers were situated, like cells in a row.

He strolled the length of the companionway without slowing. He located what he sought, four doors from his own and on the inside, across the corridor. All the staterooms were closed, probably all were locked, but only one was extrabolted with heavy metal hasps and bulky lock.

He sighed and returned to the deck. He spent the afternoon lazing in the sun, though Sardou braised him with scowls whenever they met. Tommy ignored Jean-Pierre's grimaced

messages. That night he and Sardou ate dinner as last-night-out guests of the captain. The skipper appeared totally at ease and apparently in good spirits. Only Sardou sweated, ill at ease and anxious.

"At heart, I reckon you're not bad lads." Killinsworth grinned, sweated, across the linen-covered table. He insisted that he had forgiven them for trespassing against him, for disobeying his direct orders, even for endangering his cargo, ship, and crew.

"You're right, Captain." Sardou attempted to conceal his anxiety. "Both I and Lavedon, we're just young, high-spirited lads—sorry for any inconvenience we caused you—and anxious to make port at Cap Francois."

The captain drank lustily. "And you'll be making port safely—and soon. We should come into Cap Francois with daybreak tomorrow. We get a favorable tide, you lubbers should be kissin' dry land long before noon."

"Can't be too soon for me." Sardou tried to keep his tone casual, but his voice quavered. His hand trembled on his wineglass. He dabbed at perspiration beading his upper lip and forehead. Though he laughed and said he shouldn't drink at all, he consumed several glasses of port. He looked harried, nervous, driven. He kept stealing meaningful glances toward Tommy, but Tommy ignored his fretting.

The meal dragged on, long past the tropical nightfall.

Tommy left Sardou and Captain Killinsworth somewhere around nine o'clock. When the ship's bell sounded, he got up and excused himself, leaving the two men drinking together at the table. Sardou was deep in some story of a night he had spent in a Havana whorehouse with three women vying to please and rouse and satisfy him with new delights. Such stories titillated and excited the captain and increased the rate of his drinking. Erotic adventures, described in rawest terms, made the skipper sweat and reach often for the bottle—drinking, spilling the liquid from the corners of his lax mouth, and urging Jean-Pierre on.

Tommy went directly to his own cabin. He had located a thin metal blade in the afternoon and he fashioned it into a hook, with Lily watching him silently. Then he sent Lily to stand in the hatchway and watch for anyone who might enter

the corridor. No one except Sardou should be coming into the area, but they had to be on watch for stewards or cabin boys on night errands.

Lily leaned heavily against the top step. Behind her, Tommy worked on the heavy lock with his makeshift hook. He was soon sweated down; it seemed as if hours raced past, but it was really only a matter of minutes when something clicked inside the metal lock and it sagged open in his fist.

He called Lily. The girl came quickly along the corridor to him. Tommy removed the brass fastener from its metal hook. "Replace this lock," he said, "but don't snap it shut, for God's sake. Then lean against this door as if you're waiting for me, like you don't know what you're doing or why you're standing here."

"That'll be easy."

Tommy grinned and patted the girl's shoulder. "Don't worry, Lily. Your gods will protect you."

"But my gods are not your gods, Mastuh."

Tommy shrugged, stepping through the doorway into the darkened stateroom. "Maybe they're nearer the same than you think." He closed the door behind him and lit a candle. He stood unmoving for a long time, holding his breath. He felt like Ali Baba in the cave of the thieves.

Kegs, hogsheads, caskets and boxes of rare vintage wines, expensive fabrics, and precious metals lined the bulkheads. But despite the fabulous cash value of these materials, Tommy knew he hadn't yet found the prize he and Sardou sought. This stuff was all too bulky.

A small cedar chest, a couple of feet wide and deep, lay where it had been casually shoved against a case of Bordeaux wine. Tommy's heart quickened. Before he even opened the chest, he knew instinctively that he'd uncovered the riches Sardou coveted, the treasure Captain Killinsworth had meant to split with the raiders.

A sharp rap of knuckles on the door facing brought him up, tense. He blew out the candle and stood, eyes closed in the darkness, until white moonlight filtered through the porthole, illuminating the room in misty purple.

He heard voices outside in the corridor. Lily spoke loudly, as if addressing the deaf. Tommy could not distinguish the other voice: he prayed it was a man of dim perceptions,

because Lily sounded as innocent and casual as a confessed murderer on the gallows.

He grinned despite the sweat burning in his eyes. Poor Lily. Life had cast her in roles she was constitutionally incapable of playing—first as a slave, and then as a party to a crime.

Tommy lit the candle again when it was quiet in the companionway. Opening the lock on the chest proved more difficult and took longer because it was smaller and he had to be careful not to leave incriminating scratches on its pristine surface.

He lifted the lid of the chest carefully and sank back on his haunches, stunned. The chest gleamed with the riches of plundered peoples, stacked with tall columns of what, through the laundering of possession, had come to be known as Spanish gold. The coins had been minted in Madrid, all Incan blood totally laved away in the process.

He went across the room and spoke to Lily through the facing. "Bring a duffel bag filled with cannonballs, metal bars, anything heavy."

He returned to the chest and sank to his knees before it in reverential genuflection. He remained like that until Lily's tap on the door brought him up and across the narrow cell.

The deed was quickly accomplished. He filled the thick-napped bag of coarse wool with the gold and placed as many pieces of metal as could be crammed into the chest. Then he locked it and dragged the seaman's sack across the deck. With Lily standing watch at the hatchway, he moved the pouch into his own cabin.

He sagged on the lower bunk then, his heart pounding in his rib cage. He was assailed by doubts. He had stolen the gold, had it in his cabin. Great. All he had to do now was to remove it from this ship, under Killinsworth's suspicious, watchful eyes. Hell, Sardou, you are not so damned clever after all, and I'm even more stupid for going along with you on this impossible heist.

Unable to sleep, he prowled the cabin as the ship's bell tolled off the hours. Lily climbed into the upper bunk, but the slave girl did not sleep, either. Tommy did not speak, just paced the cramped cage, to and fro.

After a sweated eternity, he heard Sardou stumbling down

the gangway, abusive, snarling at the seamen assigned to convoy him to his cabin.

Tommy pressed his ear against the door facing, listening. Sardou went on singing, cursing, raging. Then the seamen, muttering under their breath, departed up the ladder and the companionway drifted into a taut, listening silence.

As Tommy touched the knob to open his door, a sharp rap told him that Sardou was in the corridor. Jean-Pierre was sweated, red of face, his hair disheveled, clothing wrinkled. He reeked of liquor, but he looked sober. In spite of the captain's best brandy, Sardou had never appeared so coldly lucid.

Tommy cracked the door enough to face Sardou. Jean-Pierre looked ready to weep helplessly if Tommy's answer went against his prayers. "Did you find it?"

Tommy nodded. "It's everything you thought. And more."

"Aye God." Sardou looked as if he might crumple to the deck sobbing in relief and exultance.

"You want to see it? You want to divide it now?"

Sardou laughed, checking across his shoulder. "I don't want to touch it yet. I trust you. You keep it. Throw it around casual, going ashore. I'll come to your hotel room and we'll divvy the spoils—and live like Midas ever after."

XVIII

Tommy stood alone on the forward deck. His stomach churned with a nausea that had nothing to do with the choppy seas as the *St. Genevieve* approached the narrow mouth of the Cap Francois harbor. His belly tightened and spun emptily. He was moist with sweat that had little to do with the sun of Cap Francois, which braised him in a fiery white radiance, burned his exposed flesh in a searing heat and fevered the blood in his veins. Perspiration dampened his clothing and plastered it to his skin. His white shirt was wet at the armpits and clung clammily to his chest and back, and even his white lightweight pantaloons shrunk tightly on his thighs.

His heart lurched as the ship slipped through the parted lips of the large natural harbor and the moment of truth approached with dizzying speed, even as seamen hauled in sails and sailors in longboats maneuvered the schooner toward what remained of the Cap Francois piers.

He stood unmoving, stunned at his first sight of what had been one of France's finest ports of the New World. Little Paris they had called it before Henri Christophe led the natives and the slaves in one of the bloodiest revolts in history and drove the French from the island. As far as nature was concerned, this was still one of the most picturesque sites of the Caribbean, a brilliant basin hemmed in on three sides by mountains, rimmed by hills that sloped gently to the sea.

As the ship was tugged closer to the town at the foot of the central hill, he was able to distinguish houses and buildings on the distant quay. Stunned, he found few still whole and intact; most had crumbled in decay. He found it incredible

that so few of the structures had been restored in the twenty-five years since Christophe's rebellion. The ugliness of broken buildings and charred piers was intensified by the verdant green of trees, bushes, hedges, vines, all threatening to overrun the ruined vistas.

Even before they closed along the remaining dock, the smell of the town was overwhelming and nauseating. Suddenly the clean, salty smell of the ocean was dissipated and then pervaded by the sweet-sour stink of corruption from the land itself. The odors of jasmine and honeysuckle, of tuberoses and hibiscus and magnolia blossoms combined with the stench of open privies and the sickening smell from the *rigoles*, gutters built in the middle of the streets in the fashion of older European cities. If the foul smell of gunpowder and violent death no longer actually lingered on the trade winds, the memory of it assailed the nostrils. It was the repellent smells of sewage and decay and unwashed bodies sweated in misery, all stirred and mixed with exotic perfumes of tropical plants and redolent shrubs.

He felt as if he would vomit if he took a full breath in this rancid fetor, and yet other aromatic bouquets promised sensuous, erotic, and delicate pleasures—tantalizing fragrances to lure you into a paradise gone to hell.

He stared in disbelief at the quay ahead, this place to which he had come running in hope of establishing a new identity, a new life. Suddenly it was as if the blaze of color were the radiant tentacles of a nightmare. Gigantic flowers dissolved into shabby turbans of Negresses on the pier—vivid greens, faded reds, magenta, orange against the black of their faces and bodies and shabby dresses. It was a sea of black faces. There was not a white face anywhere on the suddenly overrun pier, milling with shouting, gesticulating blacks, like mindless supplicants before some heathen diety, the alien ship.

The overwhelming, reclaiming green vines and shrubs flared in a riotous garland of flowers and blossoms over hidden evils concealed in a rotting underbelly—drooping willows, wild oranges, lush elders, strange bushes white with blossoms, like maggots churning from the bowels of death. Beyond the charred dock facilities, beaches glittered with virginal whiteness against the blue-green purity of the water, alive with

varicolored fish and plants, but just above them crouched the clotted salt marshes, the curdled, stinking sodden swamps.

Around the boat swelled a bedlam of sounds, the glistening naked bodies of swimmers, the sweated torsos of stevedores, everyone moving in some frantic activity, no one accomplishing anything, and always beyond, the broken, crippled city, the virulent greenness of the encrouching vines crawling down, a menacing pestilence from the unsullied amethyst of the mountains.

Below him and around him, scores of hurrying black men ran aimlessly back and forth as lines were cast ashore and looped, securing the ship alongside the battered docking. He watched the gangplank being lowered. Tensions built in him.

Lily stood near the railing with the duffel bag and their own meager baggage. That coarse woolen sack stood out in Tommy's fevered eyes like some fire-struck cross.

Holding his breath, he glanced toward the bridge. Moments earlier, Captain Killinsworth had been directing the berthing of his ship; suddenly he was no longer up there.

Tommy's heart sank. Was this a good omen, or had the old reprobate spied that duffel bag?

Tommy looked around, chest tight. Where in hell was Sardou? He searched the busy deck, finding no trace of his strange friend. He had not even heard from Jean-Pierre since last night at his door. He strode across the deck to the gangplank. "We won't wait any longer, Lily."

Lily nodded. The slave girl looked as if she were being devoured by tensions and fears. Her eyes glittered with ill-suppressed panic, her lips were drawn in a taut line. She looked ready to explode.

He looked at her, pitying her. Somehow the slave would have to struggle down that gangplank under the unmanageable weight of the duffel bag. For him to suffer assistance to his body servant would only draw undue attention to them, exacerbate an already touchy situation. There was no reason Killinsworth could not arbitrarily demand to inspect their bags before they departed his ship.

Lily jerked her head toward the bags as if they contained nothing more valuable than soiled shirts, and two baggage handlers from ashore moved to assist her. The black men grunted, sweated, and staggered down the ramp. One of

them, gasping under the weight of the duffel bag, said, "What you got in this bag, nigger?"

"Gold," Lily said. "Don't it feel like it?"

The black sneered his contempt and called a fellow to help him tote the bag down the gangplank. Lily walked with dignity, unhurriedly ahead of them, and once ashore, crossed the plankings to engage a hack. Tommy's heart lifted. He was so proud of her that he would have caught her up in his arms and kissed her, if that would not have created an even more scandalous scene. Slave owners, even in Haiti, seldom embraced and caressed their body servants in public. He sighed heavily, watching her move in the blazing sunlight.

"Glad to be going ashore to dry land, be ye?"

Tommy caught his breath and heeled around. He felt his face go gray as the blood seeped downward. Captain Killinsworth stood in a shaft of shade from an overhang, red-faced, his small eyes glittering like beads.

"Aye." Tommy nodded. "Glad and thankful. Thankful to be still alive—no thanks to you."

"Let's not talk gratitude, Mister. No sense in gettin' me riled when we be partin'."

Tommy nodded and grinned at the captain. It was easy to smile. The duffel bag lay on the dock, the baggage boys stood waiting to be tipped. He felt a savage sense of relief to be safely departing the captain's company, but he did not bother to mention this. He merely bowed and started down the gangplank. He wanted to run, but he forced himself to move with at least as much dignity as Lily had demonstrated.

"Just a minute, Mister." Captain Killinsworth's voice impaled him.

Tommy stopped, taut, as if pinned to the ladder. His fist gripped the rough rope. He heard disembodied voices around him in mindless pandemonium. The sun broiled his back in his own sweat. He glanced over his shoulder, managing to keep his face expressionless.

Captain Killinsworth smiled coldly. "Ain't you going to wait for your partner in crime?"

"Partner, Captain? Crime? What crime?"

"You know what crime. I could have throwed you and Sardou in irons for the way you took over my ship. I could have delivered you to the *chef de gendarmerie* here at Cap

Francois—in irons—to hold for legal action by my ship's owners."

"Someday you'll forgive us for saving your life, Captain."

Killinsworth swore. "You and Sardou is fortunate I do feel kindly toward you. All I ask is that you git him as well as yourself off my ship."

Tommy sighed and shook his head. "I think Sardou can find his way off your ship, Captain. And I assure you, he'll be even happier than I am to debark."

Killinsworth watched him narrowly. "I swear I can't understand why you'd be so happy to go ashore in a cesspool like this. The only white man among blacks what hate the color of your skin." He made a sour face. "And God almighty, how it stinks."

Lily had found them transportation—a rickety hack, a spavined horse, a senile black coachman. Lily returned to where Tommy stood with the duffel bags, tipping the baggage men, walking ahead of the rattling conveyance.

Before Lily and the battered trap could cross the cobbled street, an ornate barouche of deep mahogany, completely out of place in this poverty, with red upholstery and iron-rimmed wheels, cut directly across their path, almost running Lily down.

Lily stopped and leaped back to save herself. She cried out, angered and shocked, yelling at the occupants of the luxurious coach. She waved her fist toward the high-hatted coachman in silk and the two women in the open tonneau.

Tommy stood on the dock and stared, openmouthed, at the women in that carriage. The older woman was incredibly lovely, but the younger was more a vision of loveliness than a reality. They were two of the most beautiful women he'd ever beheld, and the one so excrutiatingly sublime she may as well have been alone in the vehicle for all the attention she permitted her companion.

A dainty red parasol almost shaded her face, which was faintly shadowed beneath the floppy brim of a straw picture hat trimmed in red. She sat slightly apart and aloof from the woman beside her. She rode, totally heedless of her gorgeous companion, the noisy, staring rabble in her path, the blaze of the sun, the stench of fish, tar, and refuse.

She sat remote and upright, oblivious to the ugliness and

squalor around her; it was almost as if she rode in a setting of gaudy splendor worthy of her regal presence. Her bare arms and soft-hewn face were a light bronze color with golden highlights, and strange green cat eyes glittered when touched by the sun. A pennantlike shadow of her parasol darkened her cheeks to mauve and deepened the red of inexpressibly voluptuous lips.

As the carriage rolled past, the lovely woman turned her head just slightly, her gaze drawn to the only white face in that sea of ebony. She stared at him for the space of a breath that was like a brief eternity. Her gaze was bold, challenging, almost disdainful, and yet not devoid of interest. Her green, appraising eyes undressed him and inventoried the lithe, muscled body, the wide shoulders, the flat belly, narrow hips, and long legs in tight-fitting pantaloons. In that brief instant her eyes devoured him and cataloged him. She neither smiled nor frowned. She showed no expression at all, and yet approval boiled in those strange eyes.

He straightened slightly, forgetting the heat and the stench and his initial rage, and stared back at her; their eyes met and held. It was as if her gaze promised everything, dared everything, and then the carriage rolled past along the crowded pier. He felt a faint emptiness when she was gone.

"That was Ma'mselle Jade, M'sieu." A timid, whining voice sounded at Tommy's elbow and he jerked his head around. A white man stood there; or rather a stick caricature of what once may have been a man. This one held a straw hat in his boney fingers, his hair was wild about a sunken, wild-eyed clown face. Though tall, he weighed no more than a hundred pounds. His emaciated body was clad in a filthy white linen suit, tattered white shirt, and run-over shoes several sizes too large for his feet.

"My name is Policarpous, M'sieu. Fortune Policarpous, at your service." He jerked his head, glancing over his shoulder as if expecting a knife in his back or a whip to lay open his flesh. He even cringed involuntarily, though no one seemed even to look at him except Tommy.

"My God," Tommy said. "Are you sick?"

That strange, skull-like face twisted into a grimace that was both laughter and tears, and yet neither. He was afraid to laugh and he had no tears left, even for himself. "It is a

sickness of the soul, M'sieu." He shrugged. "It is of no importance. . . . I speak to you only because I am a fellow white man in this terrible place. I have been here a long time. Many years. I was here at the time of the great revolution. . . . I have managed to stay alive. Perhaps for a few sous, I might be of great assistance to you, a stranger. I know the best hotel—the only place one can stay that is not a pigsty. I know directions. I know my way around Cap Francois. I can be of great help." By now his whining voice was pleading.

"All right. All right." Tommy nodded, hating the way the man cringed and begged, with his voice, his eyes, the way he held his body, the way he stood. It was as if he stayed alive only by begging for life. "We will take you along to the hotel. Perhaps you can help me find—"

He stopped talking because a squad of armed soldiers ran through the crowd, battering people aside, holding their muskets, with bayonets fixed before them. The thin white man retreated a step and cowered as if trying to shrink into the plankings of the pier. Tommy found himself surrounded by the armed soldiers. Their sweated black faces were cold, gazes burning into him.

"What is this?" Tommy said. "What's the matter?"

One of the men stepped forward. Now Tommy saw that the red uniforms were ancient, tattered, and bedraggled, gear taken over from the old French army of occupations. The guns, too, had been new when the Haitian revolution began. The man who stepped out of the armed ranks wore a jacket with a high collar, emblazoned with a seal of rank. Secured tightly, the collar must have been a painful yoke, brazing his chaffed neck. Sweat dripped along his face. "We will ask the questions, M'sieu," he said. "I must regretfully inform you that you are under arrest."

It must have been instinct that caused Tommy to jerk his head up, because Captain Killinsworth on the bridge of his ship was too far away: Tommy could not actually have heard his savage peals of laughter. But he could see the old sea dog up there, head back, laughing.

Tommy brought his gaze back to the sweated officer. "Do you mind saying why I am under arrest?"

"We must check your passport. You will be required to fill

out certain papers and to answer certain questions. Whether you remain in prison will depend on your answers."

"You can't hold me without charges."

The officer gave him a pitying smile. "We can do what we wish, M'sieu. We are with the authority to shoot you here as you stand if you resist arrest. I hope you will come quietly. It is to your own profit so this to do."

"I would do as he says, M'sieu." Fortune Policarpous looked as if he had screwed up his final ounce of courage to speak.

The officer slashed out with his arm, backhanding Policarpous across the face and sending the scarecrow man sprawling onto the plankings. Around them teemed what seemed to be at least half the population of Cap Francois, and all of them were laughing, pressing close. The entire pier was now a clot of white shifts, black faces, and bright bandannas. White teeth glittered in blazing sunlight as moon-dark faces crowded around him.

He felt Lily thrust aside one of the soldiers and press close against his side.

"Who are you?" the officer said, staring at Lily's lovely face and slender body and the boy's green suit.

Her head tilted. "I am Lily. I am Mastuh Lavedon's slave."

"You are not his slave in this place," the officer said. "We have no slaves in Haiti. You are free to walk away."

"My servant is not under arrest, though she arrived on the same ship with me?" Tommy said.

The officer shrugged. "She is black. She is free to go."

Tommy nodded. By now the cowering Policarpous had pushed himself to his knees, looked around to see if he would be permitted to stand. When no one made an overt move toward him, the scarecrow got timidly to his feet. Tommy said, "M'sieu Policarpous, may I trust you to see Lily to the hotel? To be sure she has a room?"

"Oui. Oui." Policarpous glanced around, ready to duck a blow because he had been bold enough to speak. "I shall serve her well, M'sieu."

Tommy pressed some bills into Lily's hand. "This will pay for a room and food, and a tip for M'sieu Policarpous. Please stay in the room until I get there—or until you hear from the

gendarme that I am not coming at all.'' Tommy turned to find the officer's swarthy, sweated face twisted into a grimace of contempt. ''What's eating you?'' he said.

The officer merely shrugged. ''I laugh at you, M'sieu. You. Putting your trust in *le pitre* because he has a white face like you. He has also the white liver, the white heart, the yellow spine of the white race. He is alive only because we allow him to live. We allow him to live because we can laugh at him. *Le pitre. Le buffon.* Look at him and you will see how low the white man can sink just to stay alive. They say that when the soldiers came in the revolution to slay him and his wife and children, he stripped away his clothes and gave them to the soldiers. He begged them to take his wife and his children. To do with them what they wished. If only they allowed him to live. He wept, and pleaded and rolled on the flooring, kissing the boots of the soldiers and pleading for his life. He was such a clown, they let him live. And he has stayed alive by being the clown, by pleading, by begging. . . . This is one way for a white man to stay alive on this island, M'sieu.''

''If you can call it living,'' Tommy said.

Part Three

HAITIAN JADE

XIX

The prison of the *Garde du Government* was a fetid hole beyond hell. Tommy was thrown into the holding tank without formality of booking or charges by uniformed police. In his checkered past, he had sojourned brief and often agonized sentences in American jails, but he had never in his maddest nightmare imaged anything like this place of pestilence.

The decomposing building commanded a knoll overlooking cobbled streets, miserable huts, rotting piers, and stinking quays of the polluted harbor below. The structure was ancient without being in any sense venerable. Built by slave labor for the occupying French sometime in the eighteenth century, it had persisted, victim of dry rot, humidity, neglect, rotting and stinking like some manged animal in death throes.

Prisoners were herded into this huge room which was lit and ventilated by small, recessed, and barred windows nine-feet high in the graffiti-blackened walls. The holding cell reeked of human offal, clotted with that sickening, suffocating aroma of an airless outhouse. A slit latrine, a careless trench cut along a rear wall, was washed with sluggishly moving water carried by a slight incline of the gutter from an upper wall to a lower. When an inmate squatted there, bloated blue flies rose in black swarms, muzzing and whining, settling, almost too distended to navigate. Swollen rats, rigid in death and devoured by moiling green maggots, sprawled as large as lapdogs in the vile and filth-spattered gulley. Tommy stood as far from this foul area as was possible, and he breathed shallowly, enough to stay alive, and no more.

Men sprawled on mats tossed on the calcareous concrete

flooring, or crouched, dead-eyed and withdrawn, against the littered walls.

Tommy found an unoccupied space at a forward wall. He moved to sink into it and then staggered back, repelled.

He stared at the mamposteria surface, gagging. Bloody handprints smeared these stones where long-past murderers had wiped their hands. These walls themselves were death weapons: men's skulls were smashed upon them, and had been, for only God knew how many years. Brain particulate matter had dried, crusted, soured, and petrified on these ragged surfaces. Integument of forgotten men, long dead, still marred this site. And, God knew, maybe those unregretted departed were the fortunate ones. They at least had escaped this ring of hell—even in agony and violence they'd made it out of here, their heads crushed against these rough stones, these walls that were never washed down.

It was easy to decide the dead were the blessed. A smell of hopelessness pervaded this arena. Tommy moved his gaze across the flat, empty black faces of miserable prisoners, men denied any vestige of hope. They were, most of them, doomed to this place for life. Imprisoned, they were forgotten, some no longer even had friends or relatives left alive outside.

Tommy's stomach swirled, roiling with acid. He kept swallowing bile, needing to vomit, but knowing his own vomitus would only add to the stench of this cage and relieve nothing inside him.

He trailed his gaze across their twisted faces. This was a world turned upside down. Though he was scared in his gut and helpless, jailed without explanation, held without charges, without even being listed on any formal crime sheet, without hope of parole, this terrible situation still appealed to his life-instilled sense of irony, his hard-learned concept of the outrageous niceties of this life, of this dark coil. He had, only a few months ago, believed himself in hell in the southern states, a black trying to pass among prejudiced and privileged whites as one of them. This had seemed to him, in the southern United States, a particular time and place of unrelieved evil. Now he was learning firsthand about total terror.

Here, in black Haiti, was added to fanatic injustice and heartless law the element of the unknown, the senseless, mindless dictates of a government in chaos.

Back in the States, he had almost figured the mind-set of the ruling-class whites. One learned what white men would almost invariably do under most circumstances; they were pitiless, brutal toward their enemies, without compassion for their inferiors or servants. But mostly they were a stupid lot, often blinded by their own sense of cosmic importance. They became almost predictable.

Tommy shuddered. It was hellishly different in Haiti. Blacks governed this land which they had conquered in an insane spasm of hatred and vengeance from which it had never recovered, and maybe never would. These people were driven, motivated, impelled by their long-learned hatred and mistrust of white skins.

He looked around, more helpless than ever. Because the bureaucratic authority believed him to be white, he was their enemy, and he was trapped and impotent against them. Jesus, how the Furies must be laughing. They had pursued him into a hell even beyond his own imagining.

Black men milled about him, soured, sweated, half-naked, moiling with madness inside, but unable to strike except at those around them, their own kind. They simmered with fury: ill, diseased, doomed, writhing like clotted vermin in this littered, stone-floored holding cell.

Sudden bursts of raging laughter snagged at his attention and drew his thoughts outside his own mind and his own misery.

"Carbe. Don't stand there, Carbe. Move, Carbe. Move on."

"Dance for us, Carbe. Let us see you dance, old man."

Tommy watched the scrawny old man, wearing only a soiled kind of folded cotton diaper, his legs and arms like ebony pipe stems. Even his face was withered and sere, his eyes black and ill, sunk deeply in their sockets. He looked like a life-wearied man seeking a door to death but unable, or too weak, to find that threshold to eternity and release.

"Come, Carbe. Move . . . I told you, Carbe, you cannot stand there."

For a long time, Tommy numbly watched the old man tormented, punched, poked, and casually backhanded if he stopped in his slow sidling movement. Wincing, Tommy saw that Carbe's slumped shoulders and age-rounded back were gray with inch-high whip weals.

No matter what the other inmates said or did to him, Carbe did not protest or attempt to protect himself. Either he was too ill, too weak, or he no longer cared what his tormentors did to him.

"My God," Tommy said to the man crouched beside him. "Why do they torment that old man?"

The prisoner shrugged his boney black shoulders. "They hate him," he answered in a dead tone, as if this were the justification Tommy requested.

Carbe kept moving from the knots of prisoner who would not let him sit or stand in their presence. Tommy felt a kinship for the ancient: a fugitive eternally pursued, never permitted to rest. Watching the persecutors, Tommy began to see that these churls didn't hate the aging Carbe any more than they hated this prison, the guards, the bureaucrats beyond those bars. Carbe was only a convenient target for their frustration. To see Carbe suffering made them, for a moment or two, superior to something, less miserable.

At last, as if on some endless treadmill, the old man was bumped and shoved along until he crouched, cottony gray head lowered, beside Tommy. The trembling elder held himself taut, waiting to be hit or spat upon.

"Let him alone," Tommy said aloud, his voice cold and deep with outrage, strength, and fury.

For a brief instant in eternity, the old man tilted his wizened head and gazed up at Tommy. Tommy caught his breath. His heart lurched because he had never seen such gentle, kindly eyes in all his life before. Carbe quickly lowered his head again.

"Do not trouble yourself, M'sieu," Carbe said under his breath.

"There can be no pleasure in beating a helpless old man," Tommy said in that loud cold tone.

At this, several of the prisoners near them snorted in derisive laughter.

"Please. Do not oppose them for my sake," Carbe said, anguished. "You will only put your own life in jeopardy."

"Life can't be all that sweet in here." Tommy shook his head. "One way to get out is as good as another."

"One must not speak so. One must not believe this heresy. Life is a gift of the god Damballah, the green serpent of

Dahomey, a tender and good god. A gift to be cherished, bestowed upon us for a reason."

Tommy shrugged. "Why do these men hate you?"

"I am a voodoo *papaloi,* a priest," Carbe answered, staring at the floor.

"A priest? With whip weals an inch thick across your back?"

"Even so."

"Why are you in jail?"

"Because worship of Damballah is no longer permitted in Haiti," Carbe whispered. "There are two kinds of voodoo religion in this poor country. . . . It comes to pass that I practice the wrong kind."

"That's no reason to torment you."

"It is reason enough for these poor devils." Carbe spoke so softly Tommy could barely discern his words. "Who else can they mistreat? I plead. For your own sake, stay out of this. I am old. I am beyond their torments. I am not afraid of them. . . . You can only make it worse for yourself to side with me."

Tommy shrugged. "Still, it is the side I've chosen." He grinned in a twisted way. "Maybe this is Damballah's reason for bestowing upon me the gift of life in this paradise."

Carbe shook his head. "No. No. Do not concern yourself. I beg you. You will only endanger your own life, whatever chance you have of getting out of here. I am an enemy of the State."

Carbe bobbed his head toward Tommy and for one moment tilted his head so that Tommy could read the gratitude in those tired and compassionate eyes. Then Carbe sidled away from him.

A heavy-set black man, with the bookish look of the scholar, stepped into the place Carbe had vacated. Around them, the other prisoners were taut, drawn with hatred. They watched him, eyes glittering malevolently. He stared back at them. Only their weakness kept them from attacking him at once. He was new, still well fed, muscled, not yet cowed by the guards.

The stout black man spoke in a low voice. "If you hope to live in Haiti, stay away from Carbe—and the followers of Damballah. Worship of Damballah Weydo and his wife Ayda

Weydo is forbidden by law, and has been since the bloody days of Touissant and Dessalines."

Tommy drew a deep breath, held it. "Still. To torment him, to refuse to let him sit or stand in one place—"

"You don't understand, *mon ami*. These men are afraid to be seen by the guards or the police or their informants *standing* or *sitting* near Carbe. It could be like an admission of guilt. A capital crime against the State."

"My God."

"Believe me. You simply do not understand the hell my poor country has endured for twenty-five years. You are already in trouble enough because you are white. Likely, you won't live to leave this place, but you will certainly forfeit any chance of freedom if the police or soldiers see you are friendly with Carbe. His religious sect was sanctioned—or at least openly tolerated—by the French imperialists and the Roman Catholic Church. The Roman Catholic priests were silently and secretly hated by our people. Now the priests and bishops are all gone. With the last of the French and the last of the despised whites went all the white laws and everything sanctioned or willed by the French or the Church. And this includes Damballah worship. Since Dessalines issued a declaration of Haitian independence on the first day of 1804, people threw out or slew or ate the Roman Catholic clergy—as well as the Damballah *papaloi*. The Damballah worshippers were hated for no better reason than that they were sanctioned by the French and the Catholics. The Obiists ate the whites in cannablistic religious ceremonies where once they sacrificed only goats. And the new government's first act was to outlaw belief in or practice of Damballah voodoo. So, the old man is right. Stay clear of him if you hope ever to walk free."

XX

The army lieutenant's gaudy uniform was milled of the cheapest grade cotton. It hung shapeless on his lank body. There were no creases, no memory of creases; the fabric bagged under his flat buttocks, at his knees and elbows. But it was emblazoned with a dozen bright military medals, tailored in slavish imitation of those elegant uniforms worn by the French occupation officers of hated memory, and dyed with the brilliant tricolored hues to shame the peacock.

The lieutenant let Tommy stand, handcuffed, round-shouldered, in the middle of the sparsely furnished and airless crib which served the junior officer as his station. The slender black soldier, with deep-set fanatic's eyes, high cheekbones of the Caribbean Indian, and prominent Adam's apple, prowled around and around his prisoner, the heels of his highly polished riding boots clicking sharply against the bare cement flooring, which was discolored and faintly scented by urine. That stench and the fat flies of the holding tank remained in the breathless heat and silence.

"Your friend Masse has come to arrange your bail," the lieutenant said at last.

Tommy frowned, afraid of some military trick. "Masse?"

"Don't you know Masse?"

"No . . . Unless he is employed by Jeoffrin Icres."

"Oh. You think perhaps he is?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe." The lieutenant shrugged.

Tommy tilted his head, watching the officer. "May I go then?"

"Why do you think you should be allowed to leave?"

"If someone has arranged bail . . ."

"I didn't say that. I said he was here to arrange bail. If we decide to accept bail in this case. Don't be too anxious, prisoner. I shall tell you when you may go. Only I. Only I in this entire arrondissement have this authority. The fact that someone is outside to pay your bail is not operative here. What is important is, you may be an enemy of the State. That is all that matters here."

Tommy gazed at him, puzzled and helpless. "Why do you think I am an enemy of Haiti?"

The lieutenant merely stared at him.

"It is because I am a stranger?"

The lieutenant made a small moue with his full lips.

"Because I am white."

The lieutenant stood a few feet from him, peering at him from those wild black eyes. "You are not Haitian, are you? Your skin is white. You have not proved satisfactorily your identity, your profession, or your reason for entry here."

Tommy moved so his handcuffs rattled helplessly, metallically, in the silence. "How may I do that? Tell me. I will do anything, say anything I can to convince you."

The slender shoulders stiffened as if the officer came to attention before some august tribunal. He merely said, "I must advise you, M'sieu, crimes against the State are the only capital offenses in Haiti under Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved."

Tommy smiled coldly. "Too bad, isn't it, that I'm not a murderer, thief, or rapist. I could walk free, eh?"

"Perhaps. If bail were arranged."

"But I have committed only the crime of being a stranger. Therefore I am damned."

"You chatter boldly for a criminal, M'sieu. In Haiti, the administration of Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved sees compassionately that there may be some extenuating circumstances for murder. Our people have many ways of punishing the wrongdoer. And so murder becomes almost a philosophical question. Even if murder appears at once to lack immediate justification, often hidden reasons of hunger, betrayal, cruelty, or other fearful wrongs might provide clear justification for murder in the eyes of the State. And theft may rise out of desperation, despair, bitter need. And rape? The charge of rape may be a vindictive woman's weapon of vengeance."

Tommy shook his head. "What you're really saying is that Don Juan Zaccone—the Beloved, of course—permits any crime except an act against his regime?"

"Any action against the State is punishable by death," the lieutenant agreed blandly.

"Any action?"

"Immediate death, M'sieu. We are a poor, struggling nation without great financial resources, without splendid armies and armadas of battleships. We are attempting here to establish a responsible, compassionate government out of chaos and against great odds and interminable outside intervention."

"All right. I grant your right to mismanage your nation your way. But I also vow I am not here to intervene in your government or to harm Don Juan Zaccone—the Beloved—in any manner whatsoever. I hold only the warmest wishes for the success of his administration."

"Your sarcastic tone may well weigh heavily against you, prisoner. We cannot afford to take chances with our enemies from outside our borders. There are many enemies from without who would gleefully watch us fail—would stealthfully help us fail. . . . This shall not be permitted to come to pass. Such enemies shall be dealt with summarily."

For some moment, silence buzzed with the bloated blue flies in the sweltering room. Tommy watched almost idly the armed, uniformed soldiers standing sweated, guarding at both inner and outer doors to this office.

At last, Tommy spoke in a flat tone. "I am not an enemy of your State."

"I am afraid, prisoner, this will be for us—for me—to decide. You see, we are not so naif here that we expect a foreign scoundrel to walk in and announce his criminal intentions against us, eh?"

Tommy exhaled heavily. "I am here in Haiti only to manage the estate of Monsieur Jeoffrin Icres."

The lieutenant's brow tilted slightly. "In good time, M'sieu."

"You mean I haven't the right to ask for protection?"

"You have no rights except those I permit you."

"I ask you for the right to contact Monsieur Jeoffrin Icres. Get word to him, I entreat you. You'll have this matter cleared up at once."

The lieutenant stared at him. The black fanatic's eyes glittered. "May I remind you once more, M'sieu? You seem not fully to understand how delicate the position you occupy here is. Only I stand between you and a firing squad. You may well be shot for no more than such emotional and unreasonable outbursts as this."

"Outbursts? My tone is *tres* reasonable under the circumstances—"

"There you go, trying again to influence my decisions."

"My God. I merely suggested. I merely tried to suggest—"

"I strongly advise the prisoner against any more such behavior as this in the future. . . . I am trying to make just deliberations here. For your own good, realize, please, that your very life hangs by a thread."

"That's what I do realize. That may be why I seem overemotional to you."

"It will not help. It will not influence me toward you. I consider only the charges and the manner in which you refute them."

"All right. What is your evidence against me? What basis for your charges?"

The lieutenant slapped the flat of his hand down hard on the pine tabletop.

"Prisoner. There you go again. The questions. Will you not learn that *we* ask the questions?" He exhaled in exasperation. "I can tell you only this much. We were informed against you by a friendly source from the selfsame ship which brought you here."

Tommy winced. "Captain Killinsworth?"

"I'll ask the questions, prisoner." The officer smiled faintly. "Why—except to profit from some illegal activity—would a white man such as yourself come to our poor country? Especially if one knows anything of our recent history. White people sacrificed to voodoo gods. Eaten alive in religious ceremonies. Beheaded. Only an agent, a provocateur, would be so tempted, it seems to reasonable men such as ourselves. Such agents are well paid by the imperialistic United States. We have proof that the capitalistic United States would enslave our country—in the high-flown name of our own freedom. A democracy protected by the might of the United States. All the while they practice total enslavement. They set

up governments which they call democratic—often with inhuman dictators as puppet rulers—while the capitalists bleed us to death. The United States does not want us as territories. They would not even accept us under such terms. This would be too expensive. It would cost them too much, a price they do not have to pay as long as with puppet governments, under their thumb, they can fuck our women, exploit our resources, hire our labor—at pennies a day—and buy our raw products for a few paltry centimes. Who would *own* slaves under such conditions, eh? Where else could those fat-bellied exploiters find such treasure at such bargain rates, eh, M'sieu? Is it your motive then that we must prove? There is your motive."

"I came here to work."

"Why? Why would you do that, prisoner? Citizenship in Haiti is restricted by law to persons of African origin. The sole right to possess property is part of that citizenship. . . . Why else then would a white dog like you come here—except to disrupt and confuse?"

Tommy stared at his hands, refusing to allow them to tremble visibly. "I was informed that your government and its people would welcome anyone who could help you rebuild. Welcoming strangers with firing squads seems a hell of a way for your people to rebuild your country."

"No, M'sieu. We welcome those who can help us—with knowledge, craft, money—to rebuild. We do not welcome thieves, criminals, or spies. Yet the United States sends these agents on every ship. The United States provides us a little assistance and many spies and provocateurs. They wish to own our souls and our resources for a few bags of wheat."

"I know nothing of any of this."

"What else would I expect you to say, prisoner? Isn't that the heroic stance of the invader?"

"Do I get a trial?"

The lieutenant almost smiled; his lips quivered though his ebony eyes remained chilled and wild. "You are having a trial, prisoner. I have been assigned by my superiors to pass judgment on you. I may as well tell you, you are under the final jurisdiction of the Department Du Nord, ruled by the commanding general of this department. His dictum are law. He acts on authority of President Don Juan Zaccone—"

"The Beloved."

The lieutenant sucked in his breath sharply. "One can get one's tongue hacked off for such derogatory remarks."

"And there is no one to whom I can appeal?"

"There is only me, M'sieu. I am your judge, your jury, your executioner. We officers of the army are never called to account for our actions. It is accepted that we act in the best interests of our country. The president has delegated his representatives—and you are right, there is no superior authority above me in this arrondissement."

"And I must deal with a man who will not take the simple step of asking Jeoffrin Icres who I am or why I am here?"

"I expect you will tell me all I need to know before I am through with you. . . ."

Tommy sweated, the agonized sense of his helplessness dripping like cold sweat down his rib cage. Salty beads formed at his hairline and leaked into his eyes like tears, only without the cleansing pain of tears.

At last he lifted his head and gazed at the young officer. The lieutenant was younger than he, unusually well educated for men in this benighted area, but he was a zealot, a fanatic who likely saw enemies of the State behind every banyan tree.

The lieutenant rocked on his toes toward him. "I ask you, prisoner. How much money do you have?"

Tommy's head jerked up. The official's odd tone offered the first hint of some crack in this zealous administration. Perhaps this whole charade was only a means to extract bribes. But even as he thought this, he doubted it. He was allowing his experience in the white Bible Belt of the South to color his perception of the Haitians. They could take any earthly possessions from him as easily after his death as before it, and run no risks that might betray their rickety regime.

"You know what I have with me," he said. "I might be able to come up with more. How much do you want?"

The officer's voice hardened. "I do not want *anything*, M'sieu. Make no mistake about that. The State may by law confiscate the full amount of money or property brought inside our borders. This is a provision of the tax code."

"If I were to pay you all I have, would you permit me to contact M'sieu Jeoffrin Icres?"

The lieutenant spread his hands. "I think if M'sieu Icres wished to intercede for you, he would contact us himself, prisoner."

"Perhaps he's tried to. Perhaps he has. Have you yourself spoken with his man Masse?"

"I have only your word that Masse represents M'sieu Icres."

"My God! Well, ask him."

"The arrogant American. There he goes once more. Telling one how to pursue one's job."

"I'm only trying to help both of us."

"The best way you can help is to confess at once. To thus get this unpleasant business ended quickly."

"Unpleasant? Do you find this unpleasant? You don't act as if you find grilling me unpleasant."

"Oh?"

"You seem rather to draw pleasure out of tormenting a prisoner you intend to execute no matter what he says."

The lieutenant almost smiled. "Would you deny escape from the tedium of everyday army existence, prisoner? Well, perhaps even you will enjoy what is to transpire next."

The lieutenant hitched his shapeless jacket up on his thin shoulders and walked across the small room to the outer exit. He rapped on its facing with the haft of his saber and then spoke rapidly in the Creole patois spoken by most of the natives. The heavy door was opened at once and two noncommissioned soldiers, armed and clad in shapelessly cheap cotton uniforms, stepped inside and stood at attention staring into some middle distance.

The lieutenant gestured almost indifferently toward Tommy. He said in a mild tone, "I want this prisoner searched."

The two privates laid aside their aging French-manufactured musketry and approached Tommy warily from each side. Tommy was head and shoulders taller than either of them, better fed, healthier. He watched them coldly and stood his ground, unyielding.

The soldiers hesitated, arms extended halfheartedly toward the prisoner. They respected the strength and brawn of him, even while he was shackled.

"Strip him," the lieutenant ordered.

One of the soldiers caught Tommy's shirtfront and jerked

the buttons free from the buttonholes. The other clutched gingerly at Tommy's belt buckle, loosened it, unbuttoned his fly so that his trousers crumpled to the floor about his ankles.

"*Mon Dieu,*" one of the soldiers whispered involuntarily. "Will you, before God, look at the size of the cock on this one."

"I myself never saw a prick of such dimensions on any other white man," the other volunteered, awed.

But the lieutenant was not even looking at Tommy's genitals. His gaze struck the piebald band discoloring Tommy's flat belly and froze there. He shook his head, but did not avert his gaze. He walked around Tommy, staring at the small of his back.

First the lieutenant snorted and then he laughed. "My God. *Affranchi.* The bastard prisoner is not white at all. He is a mulatto! Jesus Christ. Look at him. At that freckled, goose-egged belly . . . He is one of us! The bastard's as black as we are."

Tommy managed to nod. "My heart," he said, "is even blacker."

The lieutenant shrugged his boney shoulders. "At least I can believe you are no imperialist spy, no informant for that capitalistic intruder bent on grinding this entire hemisphere under its heel."

Tommy exhaled, feeling as though he had not even breathed for ten minutes at least. For the first time he was thankful that he'd been born a slave to an octoroon housemaid at Falconhurst Plantation. A black named Calico.

A fair-skinned man with a piebald belly. God knew, this little jest of nature had, sure as hell, saved his hide for the moment at least.

The lieutenant gestured for his soldiers to stand back, and at attention. The two youngsters continued to stare in awed disbelief at Tommy's flaccid member.

The lieutenant laughed. "Now I can believe, as Masse earlier informed me, that you have indeed come here to Haiti only to work for Monsieur Jeoffrin Icres—another *affranchi*! My God, what a joke. What a jest to share with the general at dinner! . . . Welcome to Haiti, M'sieu Lavedon."

XXI

The lieutenant rapped on the prison exit with his sword haft. Then he spoke through the barred opening. Straightening his shoulders, the young officer returned to the pinewood table and rested against it. He gazed at Tommy but did not bother speaking to him.

Tommy heard a commotion in the courtyard just beyond the windows and the rattle of iron key in iron door lock. The door swung open and a handsome young black man pushed arrogantly past the soldiers. The doorway was filled by the huge figure of a man, bigger than Tommy and, like a peacock, strutting his male vigor and beauty. No wonder. To be marginally healthy or well fed in this land of malaria, cholera, pox from every dirty port on earth, voodoo, and malnutrition was sensational. To thrive on such an existence set a man apart indeed. And no man was more aware of the figure he presented. Everything about him stressed his extraordinary qualities. In a land where few men could or would grow beards, this one proudly displayed a fierce black mat of close-cropped hair along his jaw, about his mouth and across his jutting chin. His hair grew in a tight mat from his high brown forehead, deeply indented at the temples. The beard and the mildly receding hairline made him seem older than his actual years. Yet his eyes were warm and alive and black, set under thick brows. The nose was straight, narrow across its bridge and flaring at the nostrils. His lips were dark carmine and full. He wore a plain, cheap cotton shirt and denim work pants. Barefoot, there was yet a look of the regal about him.

The young black strode across the room to where Tommy stood handcuffed.

"I am Masse," the black man said in a voice that rattled against the walls. "I am the foreman of the plantation of Monsieur Jeoffrin Icres."

Masse extended his hand and then saw for the first time that Tommy wore manacles. Masse jerked his head around, looking at the young army lieutenant for the first time. "Why is this man wearing handcuffs?"

The lieutenant straightened. "I would not ask too many questions if I were you, Masse. Now that you are here, now that you have arranged bail, the bastard *affranchi* foreigner will be released to you. Let it go at that. Do not ask too many questions. Do not make enemies of those who govern."

"I am not afraid of you. Of any of you," Masse said, his voice thundering in the room.

"That is because you are a fool."

Masse straightened, angered, his deep-set eyes glittering, but Tommy spoke quickly. "It's all right, Masse. Just get me out of here."

The lieutenant laughed. "Listen to the *affranchi*, Masse. No matter what else, he is far smarter than you. A donkey eating briars is smarter than you."

Masse's huge body went tense. Muscles and tendons along his biceps and shoulders corded under his almost transparent white shirt. He set himself, looking ready to lunge at the officer.

"Please," Tommy said. "Let's get out of here. I don't know about you, Masse. But I have had trouble enough for one day."

"Words of wisdom," the lieutenant taunted. "A day in the holding tank might not give you any better sense, Masse, but it would bend you. You keep pushing me and I may break you."

With movements almost languid and feminine in taunting delay, the young lieutenant found a key and unlocked the manacles. Tommy let them fall to the concrete floor and stood massaging blood and feeling back into his whitened wrists. "You may go," the lieutenant said. "Thank God for the kindness and compassion of Don Juan Zaccone and go in peace."

Masse's voice quavered with indignation, belligerence. "Kindness? Compassion? Don Juan Zaccone? What a fool's choice of words. Why not try greed, theft, blackmail, bribery?"

The lieutenant straightened, his face taut, his black eyes raging. But Tommy stepped between them. "Masse makes a joke," Tommy said.

"A poor joke." The officer trembled. "The kind of seditious joke that can get one before a firing squad."

Tommy had caught Masse's biceps, which were like huge sculpted iron blocks, in his fists. Using all his strength, he turned Masse toward the front door. "I am sure M'sieu Icres is anxious about us, Masse," he said.

"Yes." The officer's voice rasped at them. "Get out of here while I still allow you to go."

Unwillingly Masse permitted himself to be herded toward the door. Tommy winced, glancing over his shoulder. They had delayed long enough in this place, too long. He drew a deep breath and spoke in a whisper. "An old man," he said. "His name is Carbe. He is very old. They will kill him in the jail unless someone gets him out. . . . If you would advance me enough for his bail, I would repay you as soon as we get to the hotel."

Masse hesitated a moment and then nodded. He turned to speak to the officer, but the lieutenant had overheard Tommy's careful whisper. He held himself erect and faced them half across the room.

"Carbe? The Damballah *papaloi*?"

Tommy and Masse turned, gazing at the official. The lieutenant's brow tilted, his mouth twisted as if he'd eaten an unripe fig. His voice raked at them. "The *Americaine* wishes Carbe the ancient one free?"

"They are going to kill him back there unless someone protects him," Tommy said.

"How much is bail for Carbe?" Masse asked, carefully controlling the rising anger in his throat.

Watching them for a moment from beneath that tauntingly tilted brow, the lieutenant shrugged. "Because the *Americaine affranchi* is a newcomer to our land, I shall honor his request. I shall order Carbe the old one freed at once, in the name of

the *Americaine*. I shall prove to him the compassion and generosity of Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved."

"How much do you want?" Masse persisted.

"Nothing." The lieutenant waved his arm. "Not a gourde. Not a sou. I shall free the ancient one for what he is worth. Nothing. Go in peace and in praise of Don Juan Zaccone. I assure you Carbe shall be freed at once." He laughed, a bitter, raking sound. "Though I don't know where he will go when he is free. I don't want him in my prison, and nobody wants him outside."

The hotel to which Masse led Tommy from the jail was dilapidated, scarred, unpainted, and slowly rotting in the Caribbean sun. Tommy stared, unable to believe that this hovel was the best accommodation Cap Francois had to offer travelers. "This place?" He stared at Masse. "Are you sure there is no better inn?"

Masse nodded with a faint smile. "This is Cap Francois's most elegant hostelry. Not quite as wonderful as it was in the old days, I am told. Still, I think you will not want to tarry here any longer than you must. I assure you that Monsieur Icres awaits you most anxiously."

Tommy nodded. "Yes. Yes. I understand." This was the fourth time Masse had protested any further delay, urging him out of the city and into the farmland and the plantation. "There is someone I must pick up here. Some of my belongings." He did not add, a chest of Incan gold.

When they walked out of the prison, Tommy stretched his arms toward the azure heavens. He breathed deeply, feeling he had been days in that stinking arena, scarcely able to breathe at all. He found nature's portions of this strange island idyllically lovely, even if the black people had destroyed and polluted everything they touched. The sky was serene—clearer and cleaner than any he'd ever encountered before. Banyan trees spread vast canopies, as if to hide the ugliness wrought by man.

Masse unobtrusively pointed Tommy toward a waiting carriage. The conveyance was an ancient coach belonging to another age past memory, battered and shabby but with a pair of elegantly groomed horses. With some pride, Masse al-

lowed that he was foreman personally in charge of the Icres plantation animals. "No matter what else," Masse said. "My animals get good care and attention."

"I am sure of it," Tommy said. He liked Masse. It was good to find a man one could trust and admire in this nightmare place.

A footman waited for Tommy and Masse to enter the decrepit coach, then mounted to the driver's seat and cracked his whip. The sound was sharp and loud, echoing across the somnolent harbor.

The sprightly horses started with a sudden jolt, but the driver quickly got them under control in the congested street. They trotted up from the quay at a smart pace, passing burdened oxen, pedestrians, and men with their *bourriques*. These carts were ladened with cotton, coffee bags, sugarcane stalks, and vegetables. Off the quay, the driver turned his team into a raggedly paved street, past a once imposing square now gone to seed and spattered mamposteria buildings which once had gleamed whitely in the tropical sun. The buildings were filthy, foul-smelling *cailles*, most built of any available material that might hopefully retard the rain and yet permit any errant breezes to stir through those breathless huts. Everyone threw his garbage out the front doors of the peasant hovels. Everywhere were heaps of manure, broken glass, crockery, rubbish, and countless naked and malnourished children screaming and splashing in the open sewers. Flies swarmed everywhere.

Tommy winced, finding it all heartbreaking and yet repellent at the same time. There was no sense thinking about it. Nothing could be done for these people, many of them ill, poorly fed in an Eden of wild bananas which they called figs, of a gulf loud with the incessant jumping of fish, of mangoes and guavas and avocadoes growing profusely everywhere. Worse than the hunger was the exploitive governments which changed often, but in the lives of the miserable Haitians, changed nothing. Tommy's mouth twisted sourly. Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved. Dear Jesus . . .

"This is the Hotel Couronne," Masse said, swinging his arm toward a three-storied concrete building with red-tile roof ready to fall in upon itself from age, neglect, and misuse.

"Oh, my God," Tommy said under his breath.

He stared at the rotting edifice, Masse laughing at his side.

Brightly colored small birds, slithering green snakes, foot-long lizards disputed territories with outsized rats, ants, and vermin in the aged vines that completely covered the outer mamposteria walls of the old hotel. This calcareous concrete was long pocked, broken, streaked, and crumbling.

Tommy and Masse walked the unpleasantly scented, mildewed, smoked, and darkened corridors to Suite 12, to which an unsmiling desk clerk directed them.

They found the numbered door swung open, almost like a broken wing. Tommy hesitated at the threshold, shaking his head. The room had once been beautiful, oversized, with sixteen-foot ceilings and tall French windows to entice breezes from the gulf. Through the windows, scabrous railings and neglected potted plants could be seen. A four-poster bed, raised on its own dais, was shrouded in torn and rotted white netting, fabric useless against mosquitoes or other insects. Lizards skittered in the shadows, or raced up the high, cool walls. The room was sparsely furnished.

"Can this be the right room?" Masse said at Tommy's shoulder.

Tommy entered the room. The aged and once elegant armoire had been overturned, as had the heavy, French provincial chairs and table. The covers had been raked from the mattress and hung over the floor and the displaced mats and carpeting.

Tommy stood, looking around. He was not astonished to find the bag of gold missing. He told himself he would have been surprised to have found any of his belongings intact.

He said, "Lily."

He spoke her name again, louder. He got only an echo. Lily was not going to answer him. Like the gold, Lily was gone, too.

"Sardou," Tommy said aloud, voice taut and raging. "That son of a bitching Sardou. I'll kill him when I find him."

Tommy and Masse left the Hotel Couronne seeking the white derelict Fortune Policarpous. To Tommy, Policarpous seemed the swiftest link between himself and his missing

property. Finding Policarpous promised a long and expensive search. Because Policarpous was one of the few white men on this island of blacks, he should have been easy to find, but Tommy soon learned that Masse was correct in his estimate: the search would be an involved matter of bribes, tips, false leads, blind alleys.

They began the hunt at the harbor because Masse insisted this was the place where Policarpous hung out, hoping to wheedle a few centimes from strangers. But the white-suited scarecrow of a man was not on the docks, no one along the piers had seen him. Not even the offer of gourdes changed this. It looked as if Fortune Policarpous was carefully avoiding all his old haunts.

Masse's reasonable advice was for Tommy to delay the search for the slave girl until after he was settled in at Icres's plantation. Many new avenues would be miraculously opened when Icres aided them. But Tommy was too rabid with hatred for the treacherous Sardou to listen, even abstractedly, to calm and reason. He had no doubt that Sardou had artfully trailed Fortune Policarpous, unseen, to the Hotel Couronne and that once there, Sardou had stolen the gold and the slave girl.

Tommy stopped, shocked, in midstride on the quay when he saw that Captain Killinsworth had already put the *St. Genevieve* to sea. God knew, those betrayed blackbirders were on Killinsworth's tail. The fat-bellied captain could barely tarry in port for favorable tides. He had run in terror for his life.

A sense of despondency ate through the rage in Tommy like hot acid. The berth where the *St. Genevieve* had ridden at anchor now accommodated another ship from the north, an American brigantine. Tommy clenched his fists at his sides. The Furies had him at their mercy now. He felt for the first time that he was somehow abandoned here. His loss had not seemed so final until he found the *St. Genevieve* gone, fleeing from the raging pirates. He was at the mercy of those mindless, drunken, uncaring gods who had haunted him since his birth at Falconhurst.

Masse suggested again that Monsieur Icres could use his considerable local influence to help them find the slave girl

and Tommy's other property. Tommy nodded as if agreeing, but he knew better. Every minute likely placed impossible miles between him and Sardou and that gold.

Sweating, he urged Masse on, scouring the town.

At last, led by a young boy wearing only cotton pants hacked off at his scrawny knees, Tommy and Masse entered a fetid alley some blocks from the hotel.

The boy paused, looked back at them. He held out his hand. When Tommy placed a gourde upon it, the child drew aside the croker-sacking drape that served as door for this jerry-built *caille* squatting in the soured mud.

Holding his breath, Tommy stepped inside the hut. At first he was blind after the brilliance of the sun in the alley. He saw the few furnishings and then discovered Fortune Policarpous. The lank man sprawled facedown on the dirt floor of the hut. He was unconscious. His lean arms were flung out above his head toward some hopeless grail.

Tommy knelt beside Policarpous. He caught his shoulder and shook him. Flies stirred in the sick-sweet aroma of wine and vomitus.

"Policarpous, wake up," Tommy said, shaking him again. Policarpous remained totally unconscious, his parted lips pressed into the hard-packed dirt.

"It buys nothing to talk to him like that, Master," Masse said. "The man is unconscious. In a drunken stupor."

Tommy nodded. He picked up the two mason jars of the cheapest wine peddled in the Cap Francois streets. He stared at them a moment and then tossed them into a dark corner.

It took almost a full hour of cold water, of slapping Policarpous's face, of forcing him to his feet and then refusing to let him fall, lie down, or even sink to his knees.

At last, Policarpous opened one bleary eye and then the other. When he finally recognized Tommy, he cried out in protest, shuddering. Horror and terror and guilt flooded down through him so he wet his pants helplessly. He stood limply, urinating down his thin leg.

"Lily," Tommy said. "What have you done with her? Where did you take her?"

Policarpous crumpled against the wall. He stared down at his wet, soiled duck trousers. He cringed, his agonized face

pleading silently with them not to hit him. For twenty-five years people had been hitting him, but he had not become inured to it.

Policarpous shook his head. "I took the black girl to the Hotel Couronne. It was as I had promised."

"To Suite Twelve?"

Policarpous frowned faintly, trying to recall. Then he nodded. "Yes. Yes. Suite Twelve. That's right. I warned her to stay there until you came for her."

"And then what did you do?"

"Something seemed out of kilter, sir. Something seemed wrong to me. I have this instinct for such things. I have always had it. It is much stronger now." He fretted the memory about his mind, remembering. He shuddered visibly. "I—sat for a long time in the lobby of the Hotel Couronne. I could not escape the sense that something was wrong. I was lucky. They did not run me away from the lobby, and I sat silently to be sure the girl was all right. I was troubled about her and, too, I was certain that you would reward me generously for serving you well."

"I'll pay you," Tommy promised, his voice gentle but crackling with the urgency simmering below it. "Tell me what happened."

"I am unsure, M'sieu. I saw the young man come into the hotel lobby. I felt evil omens at once. He was white. About your age—"

"Sardou," Tommy whispered in agonized rage.

"The young white man was accompanied by three blacks. Stevedores. Strong men. Muscular. He asked at the front desk for your room number. I heard him clearly. I heard the clerk say Suite Twelve. I sat paralyzed. The four men went up the stairs."

"What did you do?"

Policarpous shook his head, unable to meet Tommy's gaze. "I went on sitting there in the shadow of that potted lobby palm. . . . I swear to you, I did not know what to do. . . . After what seemed a very long time, a sick eternity in which I nearly died of thirst, but sat unmoving, the young white gentleman came down the stairs with his crew. He gripped the girl Lily's arm tightly. The black man carried your belongings. All of them. They proceeded across the lobby and

out of the building. I could see them in the dazzling sunlight of the street from the dark lobby. It was impressed in my mind. They drove away swiftly in a coach. I did not see anything more of them or of Lily. I was afraid to follow them. They looked as if they would kill anyone who interfered.''

''What did you do?''

''I—took the money your girl Lily had paid me and I went out and bought wine. Much wine. A lot of wine, M'sieu. Enough to escape all this evil I had seen. Enough to escape it all. I had to get away from it. . . . I was in terror. I had to escape.''

XXII

Tommy sprawled taut, drawn, and raging inside with frustration and helpless fury in the musty, cracked, and uncomfortable tonneau of Masse's ancient coach. His heart pounded in an erratic, wild way he could not control, pulsing in his rib cage, powered by the energizing poison of his hatred and defeat. Sardou had beaten him. With such ease, for God sake. It had been such a simple plan. As simple as it was perfect. Have Tommy Verder arrested on trumped-up charges and then walk away with a helpless Lily and the bag of gold Tommy had risked his life to procure. He wanted Sardou. He wanted the bastard's throat in his fists. He wanted to watch Sardou's eyes bulge from their sockets. He wanted to hear Sardou beg for mercy where both of them knew he would find none. Nothing else would satisfy him or calm this rage thundering in his chest. Yet he rode silently out of Cap Francois, not on Sardou's fast-fading trail, but on the old French road to the Icres plantation.

He stared sourly out of the coach window at the sour world of a town and a nation gone rancid and drowning in the swill of its own futility. Twenty-five years ago Haiti had glittered, a jewel of the Caribbean under the rule of the French, and now in its freedom it stank like the garbage pit of the tropics. He even began to understand a little of what the Charleston lawyer, Trevor Feaster, had been trying to say when he warned against coming to this place, even as he offered it as an option. Feaster had seen it as an option no sane man would pursue.

"Thanks for nothing," Tommy muttered under his breath.

"It will be best this way, Master," he heard Masse saying in a placating tone.

Tommy glanced at him and forced a faint smile. "Never mind, Masse. We'll do this your way. Just don't expect me to be effusively grateful."

"No, Master."

Tommy held his breath for some moments. Inwardly he admitted Masse's reason and counsel were only part of the reason why he had agreed to postpone his pursuit of the despised Sardou.

As they had departed the sordid *caille* where Fortune Policarpous cringed as spineless as a jellyfish, Tommy remained alert for some sign that might point him toward Sardou's hideout. Sardou had boasted, both to him and to the pederast Maduro in Havana, of a plantation from which he would ship slaves for Maduro's Cuban barracoons. Common sense, as well as the sane and reasonable Masse, warned him that this might be a difficult and even impossible search without knowledgable assistance such as, Masse insisted, Monsieur Jeoffrin Icres might provide. For a slave runner, Haiti was a haven and safe harbor, with incredible miles of accessible coastline, hundreds of bays and inlets aside from those ports open to foreign trade, or even the smaller coast towns open to the trade of small boats, ancient shallow-draft steamers on ten-day calls. There were a thousand places to hide, from the Gulf of Gonaives to the plains and inaccessible ranges of La Haute Mountains. A smart man could lose himself forever in these jungles, and a stranger would need a guide to find his way through the alleys of Port Au Prince.

They drove on through the town in the jolting carriage and still Tommy's hatred colored his reasoning. He had to run Sardou to earth. Time was running out. There was not an hour to lose.

He stared through the window. It was such a pathetic, filthy city, so battered and misused and neglected that perhaps no miracle could restore it. Dusty palms offered scant shade. Any of the fine French-built mansions left standing after the fire and pillage of the revolution were blackened, boarded, sagging, weed-grown. Only crude thatched huts lined the streets, and houses built of any firm material, all of them crawling with naked children and bleak-eyed, sunken-chested

women. The stench offended the nostrils, and Tommy didn't believe an outsider would ever grow accustomed to the stench.

Abruptly Tommy saw that they had paused beside the pier where he had left the docked *St. Genevieve*. A hundred light-years ago? Armed guards in ragged pantaloons plodded back and forth along the thick wooden flooring of the pier or peered unseeing from jerry-built watchtowers. People milled aimlessly along the quay.

Suddenly Tommy felt as if his heart stopped beating in his chest. As they passed alongside the pier where he had debarked this morning his gaze disinterestedly raked the ship tied at berth. He saw something that did not for the moment register, and he jerked his gaze back again to two men standing at the foot of the ship's gangplank.

His mouth parted slightly, his eyes widened in disbelief. The dwarf from his nightmares stood there, looking around as if he owned this place. Hobart Cobb and the giant black bodyguard looked unhurried but entirely assured of a successful hunt and of their prey. Jesus. Hobart Cobb had not stopped chasing him, had not forgotten that Verder had slain his brother. Hobart Cobb would never forget until he was dead. Tommy saw he was going to have to be smarter than ever before if he were to arrange Hobart's demise.

"All right, Masse," Tommy agreed, sinking back into the shadowed coach but still watching Hobart Cobb as long as he could see him. "I admit it. I need help. I hope to God you're right that Icres can provide it."

"You'll see, Master." Masse shouted at the driver to move faster because it was a long way to Plantation Jade Noir. "It will all work out. The gods will see to that."

"They're the very bastards I trust the least."

They passed out of the city and bumped along a neglected French road that skirted the shore. Tommy saw the sun dancing on the pale blue water and the fish striking everywhere and, some distance offshore, the long, rakish lines of a sloop, sails full, racing the wind.

The ruins of once pretentious villas were being scabbed over by thick green vines. The land was a place of squalor and poverty, where even the memory of wealth and power were dimmed. The Paris of the New World was a slum, even

in the rural areas. He watched the pitiless sun blaze on the scabrous walls of once white, pistachio, rose, and pale blue stucco.

It seemed such a terrible irony that filth should be destroying this island paradise. Nature seemed unaware of the dry rot of the human beings. Grandilla trees flourished, bright with the ten-inch oblong passion flower that once had provided the sweet flavoring for refreshing ices. Flamboyants blazed in bloom, every tree like a fire-shining fountain of flowers. The red of the bougainvillea tried fruitlessly to hide the scars of broken wall. Swags of fragrant jasmine dripped from dark green leaves; huge white calla lilies grew in the mire of human destruction. Orange and lemon blossoms tried to disguise the stench of human despair. Everything grew in profusion and color unknown almost anywhere else on earth. The sun and the rains and the balmy trade winds caressed and nourished every plant. It was all so useless. The same sun that vitalized the plant world sapped the last ounce of strength from the tired, dispirited, and malnourished men and women.

"It is a long distance to Plantation Jade Noir by roadway," Masse said. "But the carriage cannot cross the mountains. Only mules can do that."

Tommy saw, with sinking heart, that the human habitation withered and declined the farther they drove from the port town. They had to proceed slowly because all the roads the French had so proudly chopped through these lush jungles with slave labor, were now potholed, weed-grown, nothing more than ruts slithering through thick undergrowth. At times the density of the foliage blotted out the sun, often the roadway was scarcely distinguishable. Above them, towering canopies of mahogany, ironwood, and ceiba trees arched soaring toward the azure skies. Swarms of parakeets took to wing, chattering as the carriage passed. Multicolored orchids hung, living parasites on limbs and boles of lush trees.

Occasionally they passed a clearing where the jungle had not yet reclaimed its scarred member. A thatched-roofed *caille*, a few banana trees, a couple of lemon and orange bushes flourished in the rich soil, but were degenerating to their wild state because the inhabitants did not lift a hand or a hoe to save them. The people slept in shadowed places, or sank, staring in apathy, as the coach passed. These peasants now

harvested only that which grew in its natural state, which could be grown and reaped without toil. God knew, it was easy enough to see why the country was hurtling toward hell: because of despair, poor management, sloth, waste, and ignorance.

"These poor devils," Masse said, swinging his arm, "they care nothing for work or money. As long as they have their *clarin* they are happy. Some would trade a child for a few swigs of *tafia*."

"You've come a long way since you drove out the French," Tommy said in irony.

Masse only smiled and nodded. "There are several kinds of hell, Master. Not all of them are bright with music and the ruby faces of painted men and women."

"How long can you go on like this?"

"We only knew we could not exist any more under the yoke of the French."

"Do you really feel that you have it better?"

"I'm no fool. I know we look doomed. But under the French, we were doomed. We had no hope. We had to drive them out. And drive them out we did. I tell you, we killed every white face we found remaining on this island. If they would not leave, we slew them. We slew them all."

"That must have been a great bloodbath."

"It freed us." A strange smile lighted Masse's bearded face. "At first it was only the bloodbath. It was insane. But it was purification. We cut off white heads and nailed them above our doors. We hacked white bodies for food. First, they were the goats without horns—human sacrifices—then we quit pretending. We were cannibals in those years. We ate white flesh."

"Jesus Christ. That sounds hellish."

"At the outset it was bad. Then we learned to use more salt. More spices. More hot condiments. It was not too bad then."

"Holy God."

"Don't criticize it. Our people ate better in those years than at any time in our history, under the French, or free of them." Masse continued to peer at Tommy with that strange smile, like some smoldering fire in his black eyes. "We ate well. . . . Until all the white meat was gone."

* * *

An almost naked old man stood in a blaze of sunlight at a carrefour.

The driver yanked hard on the lines, pulling up smartly and yelling at the aging man who stood like an egret where two trails crossed on the high ground of an open knoll. At the tip of the intersecting roads a newly slain goat dangled from a crude cross, secured with vines and set up at the crossroads.

When the coach rocked to a halt, Masse threw open a door and leaped out to the ground.

Leaning from the coach window, Tommy stared at the rail-thin old man in soiled cotton diaper looking as if the sun were a heaven-fixed spotlight set on him. His cottony gray hair glistened in the light. He stood with scrawny shoulders back, like a proud and not very prudent banty rooster.

"Carbe!" Tommy called. He fought the coach door open and swung out to the ground. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Tommy watched the aged *papaloi*, fascinated, and at the same time strangely puzzled. Carbe looked somehow different, though Tommy could not say how at once. Tommy scowled, studying the venerable priest who stood before his hastily erected altar and its sacrificial goat. Fresh blood smeared the sunstruck earth for yards around the sacred place. Tommy grinned faintly. It had not been easy for the old voodoo priest to hang this goat.

"Ah, my young friend. The man who protected me in the evil place and arranged that I was to go free." Carbe cackled pleasedly.

"What are you doing out here?" Tommy said again.

Carbe laughed and limped on sore feet toward the coach.

"Stand back, evil one!" the driver shouted. "If you touch this coach, I'll kill you."

"What's the matter with you?" Tommy demanded, swinging around.

Masse came around the rear of the coach. He spoke in a bland tone. "Noab is trying to protect you from the bad medicine."

"I don't need to be protected from Carbe," Tommy said.

"Perhaps. Perhaps not. In Noab's view, Carbe practices the evil magic. The voodoo of the hated Damballah," Masse said.

"A deadly sign, Master," Noab said, trembling. "Don't look at it. It can mean death."

Carbe seemed not to hear either Masse or the driver. His kind black eyes were fixed smilingly upon Tommy. He said, "I prayed to Damballah you would come this way."

"Make the sign of the cross. Spit in the dirt," the driver cried. "Or nothing can save you."

"I sacrificed the goat that all good should follow you no matter where you go," Carbe said, ignoring Masse and the impassioned young driver. "Now you will be protected by Damballah. Protected from the evil of Obi and the false gods."

"Well, thank you," Tommy said, smiling.

"It was the least I could do for you who has done so much for me," Carbe answered with great dignity.

Tommy stared at Carbe, suddenly realizing the change he saw in the scrawny old carcass. The thick whip weals were gone from his back.

Tommy stepped nearer. "My God," he said. "The whip weals are gone. It is like a miracle." He reached out and drew his hand across Carbe's shoulder.

Noab screeched in protest. "Don't touch him, Master. It can be like touching the fer-de-lance. Certain death. Oh, kindly God Obi, I pray you to protect our white master from the evil of Damballah Weydo."

Carbe's aged eyes lightened slightly and he smiled in a self-deprecating way. "It was vanity, young friend. Damballah looks without kindness on the vain."

"And yet he permitted a miracle. That's what it is. Miraculous." Tommy turned, speaking to Masse. "I saw him in the prison. Very old whip weals, some of them standing an inch on his flesh. They are all gone."

"These people know many cures," Masse told him. "God knows there are almost two hundred plants in Haiti that possess medicinal properties."

"Two hundred." Tommy whistled. "Are there so many, Carbe?"

Carbe glanced toward Masse and nodded. "There are. For the man or the woman who knows where to find them, how to use them. The gods are kindly. There are many cures. For such a man."

"And you found a cure among the roots and herbs?"

Carbe smiled and shook his head. "For the torment and ugliness of whip weals I never found a medicinal cure."

"There you are," Noab shouted, voice quavering. "He admits he is in league with the devil."

"I am afraid it was nothing more than self-hypnosis," Carbe confessed. "But hardly a miracle. Hardly black magic. I feel nothing. I do not bleed. I heal at once."

Tommy nodded. "And is it true you walked out here and waited for us to pass?"

"So much is true," the old man said. "It was the least I could do for you. To ask Damballah's grace on your life."

"Where do you go now?"

Carbe shrugged.

"Why not ride a ways with us?" Tommy asked. "You must be tired."

The old man nodded. "One's feet get sore when one is old."

"Listen to me, Master," Masse protested. "I do not advise that you do this. Thank the old fellow. Give him money if you must. But do not invite him into our coach. . . . It is not right that you should expose Noab to this black magic."

"But that's stupid ignorance," Tommy said.

"Perhaps. Stupid? Maybe. Ignorance? Maybe. But that's what this is all about, isn't it? The imaginings of the stupid? Carbe has his fantasies. Noab has his. Carbe has his gods. Noab has his. Both fear to the death the gods and evil and black magic of the others."

"I will not drive him in my coach," Noab said.

"And there is a little more," Masse suggested. "Monsieur Icres does not believe in black magic any more than I do. But he does have a problem with his workers who do. There are those who believe that Carbe comes in the night and steals away the souls of their loved ones. Monsieur Icres would not want Carbe in his coach any more than on his land. That is not ignorance or superstition. That is looking practically at a problem. It is not what you yourself believe. It is what your workers believe. And if they believe Carbe steals them in the night, that is all that matters."

"If the old one comes near, if he touches you or you allow him to look into your eyes, terrible things will happen and

soon," Noab said, weeping. "He can turn one into a zombi with a glance of his eyes."

Carbe smiled, nodding and backing away at the same time. "It is all right, my dear young friend. We shall meet again—"

"Cross yourself," Noab wailed. "One meets Carbe. And one is among the living no more. One walks with the living dead."

"Don't be a fool," Tommy said. "I don't believe in zombis any more than I believe in black magic."

Noab did not answer, but crossed himself quickly and turned away, spitting at the ground and dry-washing his hands.

Carbe turned and plodded away toward the east from the carrefour. Tommy stood and watched the ancient priest, feeling sad and disgusted with himself that he allowed Noab's ignorance to dictate to him. But he realized how serious this was. Masse was intelligent. He did not believe in voodoo, but was aware what the strange religion could do to people who did believe. Masse had merely been trying to convey to him the facts of life among the Haitian natives. He said, "I don't believe there is such a creature as a zombi."

Noab crossed himself and turned quickly away. He climbed up in the driver's seat and tried to manage the team without letting his gaze touch Carbe's crude altar in the V of the crossroads.

Masse smiled. "I must part with you there, Master. For my part, I *have* seen zombis. Once you have seen them, the set of your mind changes. By a great degree."

They got back into the coach. Noab laid his whip across the rumps of the tired horses, racing north on the dim roadway.

"That nigger," Masse said with contempt. "Carbe is a danger. To himself and to others. He goes against the government with his worship of Damballah. He makes it hard on himself. He frightens children. He makes it difficult for us to hire or keep workers at Plantation Jade Noir."

"I cannot believe such a thing," Tommy said.

Masse shrugged. "Given time, you will."

A clamor of barking dogs, a rattling of chains and the overpowering smell of goat musk pervaded everything. Rather than speeding the coach to escape the unpleasant sounds and smells, Noab reined in and sat with his eyes tightly closed and his arms across his head as if warding off angry fists.

Tommy stared out the window. He caught his breath, feeling the hackles rise at the nape of his neck.

A dozen people, men and women, walked unseeingly along the road. They wore the cheapest cotton smocks. They were dirty, unwashed, their hair lank about their heads.

"Jesus Christ," Masse said. "Zombis. Well. It didn't take you long to find them. I am sure that Noab would tell you these wretches are Carbe's children. The undead."

Unspeaking, Tommy gazed into those sightless eyes as the zombis shambled past on the road. He shuddered, ill. He could never again say he doubted the existence of zombis. These people *looked* dead, though they were alive and walking. It was too much for him in that moment. More than he could deal with rationally. He thought about their meeting Carbe far out on this lonely road, the slain goat, the hasty altar, Carbe's voodoo, the miraculous cure of those inch-thick, time-grayed whip weals on Carbe's back, and now this march of zombis in the middle of nowhere.

It was all too strange, too terrible, too unreal. It was like looking into Masse's kindly face, the warm black eyes, the strange smile, at once gentle and yet threatening. It was listening to Masse's matter-of-fact tone as he spoke of cannibalism, of eating flesh and hanging severed heads over doors. It was Noab's terrible fears and imaginings, the kind of terror that was contagious. It all came in the same day that Sardou stole Lily and the Incan gold, and Hobart Cobb arrived with his Kentucky long rifle and his huge black bodyguard. God in heaven. It was almost as if he could hear Sardou out there somewhere, raging with laughter.

Tommy gazed into those empty eyes as the zombis plodded past and shivered as if deeply chilled.

XXIII

The driver whipped the horses and raced the coach through the gates at Plantation Jade Noir as though the devil himself were on his tail.

They had traveled swiftly since leaving old Carbe at the crossroads. They had come up at last through the foothills. When they reached the crest of a long rolling knoll, they could see Plantation Jade Noir spread below them in a serene blue haze and enveloping vale of undisturbed silence. Beyond the villa and barns and corrals lay fertile valleys of sugarcane. Heat and dust inside the jostling cab was becoming intolerable. When they rode out of the shade of the high stands of mahogany trees, the blazing sun seared them. There seemed not a cooling breeze on the entire island.

They entered the grounds of Jade Noir Plantation through crumbling concrete gateposts, each of which once had stood whitewashed, stately, and crowned with gilded wrought-iron lanterns. The shell-paved lane that wound through now shabby rows of royal palms, neglected and cluttered with brittle brown fronds hanging like broken wings, was almost overgrown with weeds and vines that choked most of the thin, high-tufted trees. Despite the neglect, the approach to the mansion was stunningly lovely and not a place of desolation. No human tended it, but the natural garden persisted. The entire acreage had once been a carefully curried and nurtured garden, aromatic and breathtakingly lovely; it was still a riot of colors. Jacaranda trees, bougainvillea, azaleas, tulips, hibiscus, crotons, tuberoses—everything spread, brilliant, if unplanned and unchecked. Not even negligence or disregard

could tame or destroy the natural beauty of the trees and flowers. Still, it looked as if all this loveliness had been thrown here carelessly.

"We cannot keep gardeners," Masse said in an apologetic tone. "As you will see, we cannot keep workers at all. They are either carried away somehow, or they run away in terror—afraid, *mon ami*, of Carbe and his evil."

The mansion was almost entirely intact, though it had been assaulted and torched in the revolution twenty-five years ago. Those sections scarred or destroyed by fire and vandalism had been closed off or cleared away. The red-tile roof masonry edifice remained, a maimed yet classic example of the open French colonial so ideal for genteel Haitian living. That memory was long dead, too! A sweeping horseshoe staircase across the front led up to an ornamental iron-railed balcony that encircled the ceiling-high windows of the whole upper floor. Scarred gray columns supported the ornate balcony.

The sun was setting as Noab halted the lathered team before the wide, semicircular front steps. The sunset flared, a red, orange, cerise, and blue cyclorama above the hazed fields and the distant mountain ranges. The soft pile of clouds drifted across the fiery, multicolored sky, glowing yellow and beige puffs.

Tommy stopped, gazing in awe at this evening spectacle. "Jesus," he murmured. "Beautiful. Aye God, beautiful. I never saw its like before."

Masse had stalked ahead of him up the steps. He paused, glanced over his shoulder, and then stopped as if poled. He gazed in wonder at the blazing heavens. "Well, I'll be damned," he said. "I don't think I ever looked at it before."

Jeoffrin Icres slumped in a crippled cane-back chair, alone on the ravaged veranda. Lizards chased shadows on the tile flooring, parakeets chattered in unkempt jasmine hedges, and dozens of cats lazed in the fading sunlight. The entire world seemed illumined in the strange sunset.

Tommy stared at the mulatto landowner he had come so far to meet. He exhaled, somehow shocked because Icres was so totally unlike the man he had expected to find here at Jade Noir. It seemed an eternity since he'd first heard Icres's name in Trevor Feastor's Charleston law office. It was as if he had embarked on some eternal odyssey to reach this place that

once had seemed a beckoning haven, a safe harbor in a new world. It had been a natural thing to look ahead in one's mind to what sort of man of color had the inner strength and fortitude to claim and hold property in this terrorized land of bloodshed, revolution, cannibalism—and voodooism, for hell's sake.

He gazed at the man in the cane chair. Whatever he had believed he would find, Jeoffrin Icres was unlike anyone he'd imagined.

Icres did not get up or offer to shake hands. He nodded his red-tinted head and waved his wrist languidly in greeting. "I assume you are the new overseer. Paul Lavedon, I believe? I'm sure you are. Masse is most trustworthy; he never fetches me the wrong man." He smiled faintly.

Icres was a slender, mincing, delicately made man whose smooth skin was somehow the color and texture of rich olive oil. At once it was clear that Icres affected prissy mannerisms that he did not realize made him appear ludicrously effeminate. The mannerisms were the memories Icres held of the ruling French. He thought his genteel manner made him appear aristocratic, aloof, and of Gallic descent. Tommy did not care what the man did. We are all strange. All of us are entitled to our self-reinforcing foibles. He didn't give a damn what rescued Icres from the maw of insufficiency.

"I suppose you must be exhausted after your arduous journey?" Icres smiled up at him and waved a lace kerchief back and forth before his own face.

"Yes."

Icres nodded, but said nothing more on the subject. He did not invite Tommy to sit down, or even mention arrangements for dinner. After a moment he said, "You may well find it very strange here, M'sieu Lavedon."

"Yes. It's not like New Orleans."

"No. I'm sure it isn't. But I was speaking of something more personal. Do you believe you will be content working for a man who can barely write his own name?"

Tommy smiled. "As long as he can pay me."

"I see. And suppose that same man is a mulatto?"

"That's of no interest to me. Even if it were, it's none of my business."

Icres waved the kerchief faster and smiled again. "So far, I

think we shall get along famously. Has Masse warned you how many overseerers, *blanc et noir*, we have had here in the past two years?"

"No sir. Not yet."

Icres shrugged. "Well, I suppose it is not too important. Still, I feel I had better warn you about the security of Jade Noir under my ownership. It is a coveted property I can assure you."

"I am sure it must be."

"Coveted by many blacks who hold all power in Haiti if you understand my meaning."

"I think so—the followers of Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved."

Now Icres smiled openly, pleased.

"You get my meaning entirely. As I said, I am a mulatto. I am one of the *colored* people, a vanishing race in Haiti. There is a marked line between the two classes and mulattos are definitely beneath the ruling blacks."

"I understand."

"Do you? I don't think you have any inkling of how strange it is that I am permitted to own property here. During the revolution, all whites were driven out or slain. Blacks beheaded any white they found and hung the dried skulls over their doors. Mulattos—or the colored—were exported to Cuba and the United States as slaves. It was hell, I can tell you. Two hundred Cuban bloodhounds were imported and used by the French to feed on Negro flesh. When the tide of battle turned, the French themselves were fed to the dogs, or became goat-without-horns sacrifices. Every black taken prisoner by the French was shot. The blacks retaliated in kind when it was their turn. It did not take long to decimate the French. Yellow fever and cannibalism successfully annihilated the remnants of the French garrison, and the French did not send in reinforcements. The blacks were victors. After they had in a frenzy slain and eaten every white they could find, they turned on the colored people. Those of us who managed to hide in the mountains until the orgy ended, were permitted to come back in a delicate imbalance of peace. I was able to wrest this property from the blacks who had appropriated it from the dead French owners but were then unable to operate it, found they did not even want to. So here

I am. I am an *homme de coleur*. I am barely tolerated by the blacks. If, for any simple reason, even unconsciously, unknowingly, I should anger the regime of Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved or his generals, I would summarily be put to death as an enemy of the State, or at best be driven to the mulatto end of the island."

"It sounds precarious, M'sieu Icres. Less than ideal conditions for you. I promise I shall do all possible to aid you and protect you."

"Protect me?" Icres's small mouth twisted. "How do you think you can protect me?"

"I am a lawyer. Certified qualified to plead before the State Supreme Court of Louisiana."

Icres waved his kerchief in a taunting, uncaring salute. "And what do you know of Negroes?"

Tommy laughed. "I was sired by a white father and a octoroon mother. I know quite a bit about mulattos and Negroes."

Icres laughed with him. "You may do very well here, M'sieu Lavedon. I am sure Masse and I shall give you every assistance possible. Eh, Masse?"

"We all want Jade Noir to make money," Masse said.

"There is, on the face of it, no reason why Haiti should not be a rich country. It is blessed by the gods. Abundant rain. Balmy breezes. Sun. A rich earth and a sea filled with delicious seafood. Do you have any idea of the rich exports possible from the farms and ports of Haiti, M'sieu Lavedon?"

"Not yet, sir."

"Then let me enlighten you. Coffee bushes grow luxuriant and profusely in any high elevation above three hundred feet. Coffee has only to be harvested, bagged, shipped for great profit. But there is, too, cocoa, logwood, sugarcane, cotton which grows now with no culture whatsoever, on trees for God's sake, rather than the anemic bushes of Alabama. Two crops of cotton annually are possible, a product of a fine silky quality. We could ship gums, rums, and honey as well. Yet, little is shipped, less is harvested. To stay alive in this verdant paradise we must import almost everything we use."

Tommy spread his hands and nodded. Icres peered up at him in the slowly enveloping dark. Tommy could hear movement and muted voices distantly in the house. He saw lamps

and tapers appear as black house servants went about illuming the interior of the old mansion.

"We would have to change all that if we are to survive as a nation. But there is no will to achieve. No energy left. All strength was wasted in the orgiastic revolution. Now, people starve in the crowded slums of our towns. They starve! With mangoes dropping from trees and rotting. With avocadoes on trees at every turn. With crabs and crayfish and shellfish of every kind for the man with gumption enough to wade out in the clear sea and pick them up. But they don't do that. They are too sick, too weak to avail themselves of the treasures that fall and rot and stink around them. There are almost no gardens in Haiti. Everything is neglected here that requires cultivation of any kind by human toil. No one ever digs anything of his own volition. Even communication becomes more impossible as the French roads are allowed to deteriorate, as even the mule paths which once crisscrossed the uplands are destroyed by torrential rains and reclaimed by the jungle. The island is permitted to regress to its primeval state while children starve and dogs die in the gutters."

"Perhaps you could change all that, M'sieu Icres."

"I?" Icres put his head back, laughing. "I want to even less than the most slovenly black who starves to death under the avocado tree." He looked up at Masse. "For a long time Masse and I tried. We hired overseers. We hired blacks to farm. But it was too much. Too much for me. Even too much for Masse, who is an educated and healthy and ambitious man. The obstacles are too much for any human being."

"My conclusion is that you don't expect me either to succeed or to last very long," Tommy said with a faint smile.

"A well-drawn conclusion. The odds are too great. When we find blacks that are willing to work, anxious for pay and a decent place for their families to live, all of which we promise and provide here at Jade Noir, the workers stay only a little while and then they simply disappear."

"Masse told me that. I still find it difficult to believe."

"Believe it. They run in terror. We cannot keep work crews. They become terrified with superstitions that they cultivate if they did not bring with them. My housekeeper, Marie-Verlaine, is also a *mamaloi*. She is helpless in keeping the workers. She says that it is the black magic of Carbe. The

green god Damballah. Marie-Verlaine says we will never have crops or profits here as long as Carbe lives.''

As the plantation owner spoke, in a whining, yet truly uninvolved tone, Tommy stared over the top of his chair at a tableau taking place inside the house. In a lighted room beyond the sun parlor and visible through a double doorway, he saw Noab kneeling before a woman in the candlelight. It was an unforgettable moment. It was like a painting that would never fade from his mind. After a moment, a younger woman appeared, standing with her hands demurely folded before her, her lovely head lowered.

Tommy stared, forgetting Icres, Masse, the mosquitoes, the darkness closing about them, everything except that scene. He had seen the two women before. They had ridden past in a barouche at the pier. In that brief instant, he had known he would never forget them and here, by incredible coincidence, they stood in that room, ministering to the kneeling Noab.

By candlelight, they were even lovelier than he remembered.

''Jade and her mother Marie-Verlaine are M'sieu Icres's housekeepers, Master,'' Masse said in an unobtrusive voice. They watched as Marie-Verlaine spoke to Noab quietly and soothingly for some moments. Then she touched the black mat at his temples gently with the tips of her fingers. Masse whispered, ''Madame Marie-Verlaine, as M'sieu Icres told you, is a *mamaloi*, a *mere savanne*, a voodoo priestess. Noab is in almost a state of hysteria. She is trying to calm and reassure him, she will tell you. She is calling the good graces of her own gods to protect him from Carbe's magic. She is exorcizing the evil of Damballah from his body.''

''These poor wretches are so superstitious they are afraid to shit if the movement is not blessed by a priest,'' Icres said. ''How can we hope to get any work done, or to keep any black workers for very long? . . . So that is what you are up against, M'sieu Lavedon. I pray you shall not find your sojourn with us too difficult, no matter how brief.''

''I am sure I shall be most satisfied here,'' Tommy said to Jeoffrin Icres. But as he spoke he was gazing at the incredible creature in the candlelight, the girl called Jade. . . .

XXIV

The tropical night closed down in an almost suffocating blackness relieved only by remote stars as bright as crystal in the chaste heavens. A soft *whir* of bat wings stirred out in that emerald dark. Native drums pulsed in the night as if they spoke desultorily to each other—from shore to plain and jungle to rugged hills—incessant, yet muted by distance. It was as if the primitive drums of Africa spoke plaintively of the past: lost and irrevocable and unforgettable.

"Those damned drums," Icres said in an almost whimpering tone. "Sometimes, I think these lazy bastards sleep all day only so they can torment me all night."

Tommy stood and sweated in the sultry humidity of the night against which the balmy sea breezes were impotent. He listened, fascinated, to the pulse of native drums, overwhelmed by the intensity of the dark once the sun was gone. Shrouds of gray mists settled in upon the darkened garden, the narrow carriage path, blotting out the French road beyond the gates. After a while, a small blaze appeared in the clearing before the slave huts. The fire hurled a murky red glow over the gloom of the clearing and the stark shadows of the *cailles*.

The genteel tinkling of small, genuine brass dinner bells clattered in the silence. Neither Masse nor Tommy moved until the slender man in the cane-back chair pulled himself to his feet and nodded his head toward the interior of the old mansion. It was only then that Tommy was able to pull his gaze from Jade's candlelit face in that inner room.

The faint sound of the drums followed them across the entry and into the formal living room, where all the floor-to-

ceiling French doors were pushed open to the night breezes and the faint scent of jasmine.

Surprised, Tommy found that the interior of the aged villa appeared to be well preserved, although it must have been quite old when the blacks drove out the French owners twenty-five years ago. Little had been changed or upgraded in any way. He did notice that some of the Louis XIV chairs had been smashed and shabbily repaired; some of the priceless chests had been broken into long ago and still bore scars. On the left of the wide corridor, which ran from front to back of the house, was a battered library and a more carefully restored, high-ceilinged formal drawing room. Flooring had been laid of wide, highly polished mahogany boards all through the house and seemed in prime condition. Paintings were faded, but most were originals from the artists of eighteenth-century Paris, and probably worth a fortune in the ornate frames in which they had arrived here before Haiti plunged itself into this hell. The walls were of carved mahogany with details in gold leaf. Each downstairs room still intact had its decorated plaster ceilings and chandeliers imported from Strasbourg. The aged furniture, bowlegged chairs and prissy sofas, too, had been brought from France long ago and placed here lovingly. Fireplaces, mantels, and hearths were of native brick and only infrequently used. Looking at all this, Tommy felt an odd sadness for those who had poured their love and resources into this old home. . . .

A pillared and domed archway led them into the dining room. Here the walls were paneled, the ceiling-tall windows flung open. An ornate mahogany table was the focus of the brilliantly illumined salon.

Marie-Verlaine and her daughter had preceded them to the table.

The mother, a stunning woman in her thirties, sat at the foot of the long table, her daughter at her left. Marie-Verlaine was as voluptuous and as sensuously ceramic and smooth as if she'd stepped from a lush painting by Fragonard. She sat straight, regal, gorgeous. But Tommy barely glanced at the mother, moving his gaze instantly to the incredible daughter. My God, he thought, her eyes are green, even in this lamp and candlelight. The girl's eyes were as green as an Irish colleen's, but greener in her tea-rose face.

He caught his breath, aware that Jade's eyes had widened—shocked and pleased at her first glimpse of him. His heart leapt. Then it had not been imagination in that blazing sunlight of the Cap Francois pier. From her carriage, and in that moil of humanity, Jade *had* seen him, as he had seen her, and she remembered him. Aye God, she remembered him well, and with obvious delight in those strangely slanted green eyes.

All the time the others were being seated, Icres slumped in an oversized chair at the head of the table and Masse in one near the foot, and yet some distance from Marie-Verlaine and across the width of the table from her daughter, Tommy remained hotly aware of Jade's eyes upon him. It was as if she rediscovered him, his lithe body, the whipcord muscles under his jacket, the narrow hips and long legs, his vital youthfulness in this tired and effete salon.

"So you are to be the new overseer." Jade's voice somehow recalled the purity of the brass bells, as well as the humidity of the night, the soft kiss of the balmy breeze. Her eyes continued to move over him, oblivious of the others, even the rasping disapproval of her mother. This time her inventory was more leisurely. Her eyes devoured him. He returned her gaze and, as their eyes met, the distance between them melted.

"Few Haitian girls have green eyes, Ma'mselle Jade," Tommy said in a teasing way.

"Few Haitian girls have Marie-Verlaine for their mother," Jade replied in an unruffled tone. She remained quite at ease even when her mother caught her breath like an angered cat. In fact, the girl took advantage of this moment to taunt her mother under the guise of laughter. "My mother would keep me from all men. And yet no one kept her from all men. Except the Haitians. I think she scorned blacks because she hated being black."

"I hate nothing. No one," Marie-Verlaine said in a level tone. "It is that you are seventeen years old. I am still responsible for you."

Now Jade laughed in that bell-chime tone. "Were you yet seventeen when I was born, Mother? To an abandoned Haitian mulatto out of some heartless but beautiful Irish sailor?"

"One learns from one's mistakes," Marie-Verlaine said.

"One tries as best as one can to protect others from those same hideous errors. And, my dear Jade, one should never go to a wise man for advice, but to the fool who will understand foolishness and remember his own failures."

Jeoffrin Icres deftly assumed command of the conversation and well-dressed, scrubbed-faced maids served the dinner of fruit, vegetables, and succulent shellfish. They had scarcely settled themselves at the fish course when Icres started again on the monotonous recitation, carried on in a whining high tenor, of his desperate problems with unreliable work crews, and even house servants who were far more transient than he liked. It was a long, tiresome, and well-rehearsed recital of woes unfairly visited upon him. After a few moments Tommy stopped listening. He did not care how completely the ineffective man monopolized the conversation, he could not tear his gaze from Jade.

Jesus God, how beautiful she was, and as dainty as Spanish porcelain. Vaguely he saw that Masse was regarding him with some disapproval, but he could not care about that. At that moment Jade overwhelmed his mind and soul. He knew that he wanted her more than he had ever wanted any woman in his long and checkered journey through the world's bazaar of the ultimate in feminine pulchritude. He had loved women from the most sedate salons of Boston, to the music halls of Five Points, to the bayous and the old towns of Louisiana. He had never seen anything like Jade. Her beauty was so perfect and so delicate that she drove every woman and everything else from his mind. In passing, he understood Masse's censuring gaze. His mind should be on what Icres was saying, no matter how boring. It was his livelihood, the reason why he had been brought here, to serve the slender man at the head of the table, not chase after a seventeen-year-old girl like a goat in heat. Goat suddenly seemed an appropriate metaphor, because goats were used in voodoo sacrifices, and sometimes those sacrifices were of goats without horns.

Damn him! What flaw drove him? Why, instead of concentrating on the important business at hand, must he pant after the newest lovely girl he saw. How could he suddenly care so little what had happened to Lily? How could the sight of Jade simply wash Gale Michel out of his mind and heart. The hell of it was, he did desperately care that Lily had suffered trying

to serve him. Once, he had yearned after Gale, and she was still a scarred place in his heart, but he could think only that come hell or murder he had to have Jade. He did not know how he would get her, only that he would. He would have her if he had to wade through the morass of voodoo, black magic, evil, and superstition. Never had he wanted a woman so much.

Tommy forced himself to withdraw his hooded gaze from Jade's lovely face and to concentrate on the conversation around him.

Icres was still complaining about the way workers came to Jade Noir and suddenly vanished as if from the face of the earth.

"An unreliable lot, M'sieu Lavedon." Icres shrugged his thin shoulders and spread his delicate hands in a gesture of despair. "The original owner grew rich from working and selling the luxuriant wonders of this land. Fruit, vegetables, meats, lumber. We could be rich. And yet, I confess we hang on by our fingernails. The workers come promising so much and then almost at once it is hard to get a decent day's work out of them. They become—if they do not abruptly vanish into the undergrowth or the air itself!—they become dangerous, sullen, and disobedient. The goddamn nigger bastards! They are bankrupting me, and I'm afraid no matter what you believe you can do, M'sieu Lavedon, they will continue to run off into the mountains."

"They are lazy, M'sieu Icres. They run away," Jade said.

"I don't think so." Masse spoke for the first time. Tommy saw that the huge, bearded man was watching Jade with the gentle, yet somehow threatening smile that Tommy had seen in his face earlier.

"It is voodooism. Evil voodooism. It is Carbe," Marie-Verlaine said in a chilled tone from the foot of the table.

"Voodoo?" Tommy said. "Carbe? That old man?"

"Carbe is a peril," Marie-Verlaine said. "A danger to the health and prosperity of Plantation Jade Noir."

"That old man?" Tommy said again.

"How old do you think Carbe is, M'sieu?" Marie-Verlaine inquired. Her perfect brow tilted. "Fifty? One hundred? Five hundred?"

Tommy smiled in the strange fragile serenity of the Haitian

night. He heard the distant pulsing of drums. For the first time he truly began to understand how far he had come from St. Charles Street and New Orleans and even Hammond Maxwell's Falconhurst in darkest Alabama.

"I don't know how old Carbe is," Tommy said, unable to take the woman's words seriously. "I only know that he is an ancient and almost helpless old fellow." But even as he spoke, he remembered the inch-thick whip weals and the way they had miraculously disappeared. Miraculously? "I cannot believe Carbe is the danger to this great farm that you picture him to be, Madame Marie-Verlaine."

"Nor can I," Icres agreed.

Masse cleared his throat and they all glanced at the bearded man. "I find Carbe to be dangerous only in the fears and hatreds and fanaticism he might rouse in the superstitious minds of his ignorant followers," Masse said. "In that way, he may be dangerous."

"It is far more than that," Marie-Verlaine said in her iciest tone. "Carbe is a danger to this farm. There will be no fertility, no serenity, no profit until Carbe is dead."

"Carbe? Dead?" Tommy managed to protest.

"He must die." It was as if the chilly-eyed woman issued an ultimatum.

Tommy forced himself to smile. "I do not wish to oppose you, or contradict you, in any way, Madame Marie-Verlaine. You know much more about all this than I do. And yet I find it strange that you speak of Carbe's *having* to die. It should not be such a fearful problem to you."

"And what do you mean?" Marie-Verlaine peered across the table at him. It seemed the tapers flickered in a sudden gust.

"I mean nothing, Madame." Tommy spread his hands. "It is only that I am told, Madame, that you yourself are a *mamaloi*, a priestess worshipping other gods than Carbe's. . . . If you wish Carbe dead, why don't you invoke your own gods?"

"I pray to them constantly. With all my heart and soul." Marie-Verlaine shook her lovely head, her eyes dark and smoldering. "No native of Haiti can safely slay Carbe, M'sieu. Not and stay alive. He has far too many fanatic followers underground for that. Even the highest placed in the Haitian

government know this. If Carbe is to be killed—and for the good of all, he must be removed from life—he has to be eliminated by an alien, a stranger, someone foreign to this place.''

''My God.'' Tommy laughed, shaking his head. ''Forgive me, Madame, but it sounds as if you are naming me.''

Marie-Verlaine gazed at him unblinking. ''I nominate no one. This in itself might be interpreted as a crime by the followers of Damballah, the green serpent whom Carbe worships. . . . I simply state what must be done if we are to know peace and prosperity on this farm.'' Marie-Verlaine smiled coldly. ''It may be, M'sieu Lavedon, that in time, you will come to agree with me.''

Tommy felt hackles stand along the nape of his neck. He now regretted that he'd allowed himself to become this far involved, that he had drawn his bemused attention from Jade's lovely person. Now, he settled back in his chair, smiled remotely, and let them go on talking around him.

After a long time, he gazed across the table at Jade. He found her avidly watching him. She let her green eyes smile in faint promise. She met his eyes as if they shared some vital, exotic, and dangerous secret.

XXV

During the long hours of his first night at Plantation Jade Noir, Tommy lay sleepless on his rope-slung mattress in a large, multiwindowed bedroom in the east wing. This area remained intact and overlooked the dark garden. Exotic aromas seeped in on the balmy night breezes. Far across the island night, muted voodoo drums pulsed a strange, unsettling kind of disembodied heartbeat. Night birds contested for territory in the flowered park. None of this disturbed his sleep and he was exhausted, but he lay awake, haunted.

Somehow faintly astonished, he had found this room and all the others he entered to be highly polished, furbished, without a trace of dust, and spotless. He could not say why he was amazed that Marie-Verlaine and her daughter were excellent housekeepers. But he could not think of the lithe and lovely Jade as a housekeeper. On the other hand, he could not stop thinking of her at all. He kept remembering the secret promises he had read like drifting smoke in her bold green eyes. He felt himself growing rigid, tenting the sheet that covered him loosely in the warm night. He cursed because he was behaving like a schoolboy, as if he'd never had a mistress before. Well, looking at Jade made him feel he'd never truly possessed a woman. He had never even seen one of such enchanting witchery. He tossed on the mattress, uncomfortable, sweaty, seeing her clearly in the darkness, and now the drums played counterpoint to his arrhythmic heartbeat. He exhaled heavily. My God, seventeen. The girl was only seventeen years old. Yet, certainly in every way that mat-

tered, she was older than the most experienced courtesan who ever inflamed a man's fevered imagination.

Feverishly aroused, he found himself wondering in which bedroom Jade slept, and how he might discover it in a strange, dark house without waking the household. He could not. He sweated. He tried to see her in his mind's eye, if she wore some scented and diaphanous gown, or whether she slept nude in the balmy night as he did. Something struck him suddenly in the dark and he bit his mouth to keep from crying out. It was only one of the sleek cats finding a comfortable place to sleep. He cursed aloud and tried to think of something else. This was impossible, and the first cock crowed for daybreak before he finally fell asleep. . . .

Dawn wasn't much more than a green streaking of diffused light when Masse stood over him, shaking him roughly. "Get up, Master. It's a long day. We've much to do."

When Tommy finally opened his eyes and rolled over, staring vulnerably up at the plantation foreman, Masse laughed and jerked his head toward Tommy's genitals. "Jesus. You're hung like a horse. Do you always sleep with a hard-on like that?"

"Whenever I can," Tommy answered sleepily. "I'm up now. You can get the hell out of here. I'll see you at breakfast in a few minutes."

Masse's bearded face and gentle black eyes lighted in that faintly warm and yet threatening smile that Tommy found puzzling and upsetting. "Looks like you need a woman, Master."

"I need something, but not from you."

Masse laughed. "How did you guess, Master? When I was young I opened a whorehouse. Ran it by hand until I could afford to hire a few women."

"I'll bet you did."

Noab had two saddled horses at the front steps when Masse and Tommy came out of the house and across the veranda a little past six. The rest of the household was silent, except for the kitchen workers and a few blacks in the whitewashed huts of the quarters.

Drawing a deep breath, Tommy glanced around, moving

his gaze across the lower windows and then those wide open on the second floor.

Masse said, "She's not up yet, Master. Won't be. For hours. She and her mother do no housework, you know. They only oversee it."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

Masse swung up into his saddle, his mount edgy. Masse got the animal under immediate control with a strong hand on the bridle. He laughed faintly. "I'm talking about the succubus that is eating at your mind like a maggot."

"Now you're a fucking mind reader."

"Yes. A fucking mind reader. As heavy hung as you are, you'll be doing her no favors. You might even maim her."

"I'll just have to take that chance, won't I?"

"Oh, it's a tough sacrifice, but some man has to do it. Eh?"

Tommy swung up into the saddle. He gave Noab a passing smile and small salute. The black youth smiled and lifted his arm to wave. Tommy said, "Why don't we look at the workers' cottages first?"

Masse nodded, and they rode along the lane toward the barns and outbuildings. Tommy laughed. "What gives with you, Masse? Do you covet the little doll yourself?"

Masse laughed and shook his head. "I'm wiser than you, my friend. The mother is more suitable for an old stud like me. And for you, as a matter of fact."

"We don't tell lightning where to strike, do we?"

"No. But maybe we should. Maybe when we lose control of our desires, we lose control of our lives. N'est-ce pas?" Masse laughed and shook his head. "But, as a matter of fact, I don't want either of them. Mother or changeling daughter . . . I don't like them. I don't trust them."

Tommy laughed. "What in hell has trust got to do with getting into those scented underdrawers?"

Masse shrugged, his eyes cutting like lasers, his bearded smile warm and upsetting. "Perhaps a great deal. As you may learn the longer you stay on this island."

Tommy gestured downward sharply. "Your wisdom is most astounding, Masse. It's also boring as hell."

They dismounted in the dissipating morning mists outside the workers' cottages. Only a few of the whitewashed, thatch-

roofed buildings were occupied. Tommy asked if some of the workers were already in the fields. "They are not. Nor will they be," Masse replied, "until you and I march them out there. However, with the few workers we have, I suggest it may not be useful to work the fields until we can get more laborers in here. That will be a day or two." He laughed. "By that time many of these workers will be gone."

"A hell of a way to run a farm."

Masse gazed at him, implacable. "That is why you are here, Master. We—M'sieu Icres and I—have exhausted every idea, gone down every blind alley. M'sieu Icres hopes you will have some creative solution to the problem. I had better admit at the outset that I am not so optimistic."

"But then, you're not an optimistic soul, are you?"

"No, Master. Not at heart. My heart is heavy as well as black."

Tommy laughed. "I like you, Masse. No, I really do. You make it difficult, but I can do it."

Masse shrugged and gave him a faint, inscrutable smile, moving ahead of him through the well-kept, dirt-floored cottages. "It's one hell of a lot better than most of these poor wretches are accustomed to. You would think they would believe that they had found themselves in heaven here at Jade Noir. And, perhaps they do, at first. . . ."

Tommy was deeply impressed by the cottages. It was all much better than he had expected to find. Strange that people who were picked up from packing-crate lodgings, from starvation villages and miserable mountain huts, should run away from a place like this: clean, well-lighted, with food provided whether they worked or not.

"This may not look very grand to a man from a civilized place like Alabama," Masse said.

Tommy laughed and swung his arm. "Whoever told you Alabama is civilized?"

The Icres estate stretched for an eternity across the fertile hazed valley, the uplands, the mahogany forests, the rain jungles. Masse and Tommy rode slowly, inspecting everything. Few acres were actually under cultivation. Whole sections could have been made productive with a little sweat and labor. Only the sugarcane grew profusely, ready to be cut and

hauled to the refinery or the stills where it would be ground and made into sugar, sorghum, rum, and other sweetners. But nothing was done. The thick-matted green stalks wilted in the sun and would soon rot, but there seemed no solution to the problem of losing a whole year's crop.

"There may be one way to save this one crop," Tommy said.

"I should certainly welcome hearing how you would work such a miracle."

"Well, my God, it must be clear to you that Icres can't go on without some income. He would clear a good profit from this cane growth if it were cleared off and refined quickly enough."

"Yes. All we need are cutters, haulers, grinders, and cookers," Masse said in a cold tone. "All that and time. We never seem to get both at the same moment."

"That's what we've got to change. . . . I don't know what I can do about this farm. Maybe some evil is destroying it—I don't know. I don't want to get into voodoo magic and spells. But that doesn't make sense to me anyway. Looks like if Marie-Verlaine is a *mamaloi* of the Obiists, she could protect Icres's investment."

"Certainly looks like it."

Tommy's head jerked up. "What in hell does that mean?" Then he shrugged. "We'll take those problems one at a time. Our only immediate problem is saving this section of sugarcane before it rots. We can do that."

Masse smiled, gazing at him. "Do you want to share with me the way you will work your miracle?"

Tommy nodded. "The way they are worked in *civilized* Alabama. We are getting a new consignment of workers. Right?"

"They should begin to arrive at any time."

"All right. As soon as they arrive, before they have time to say voodoo, witch, or I quit, we put them in the fields. We work them as they work blacks in Alabama. Without mercy. Like slaves. I know these are paid workers, but we must get all the work we can from them at once."

Masse laughed, nodding. "Jesus. Now that's creative, Master."

"No. It's just what I learned from a man back at Falconhurst

up in old *civilized* Alabama. Before anyone has a chance to frighten this pack of workers, we keep them in the fields, in relays, until the cane stalks are cut and cleared. We do the same at the mill. By the time they start to run away—''

''Or disappear—''

''Whatever happens to them, we won't give a damn. We will have won a small battle, not the war, but a victory.''

''You may count on me for total cooperation, Master.'' Masse rode a moment in silence. ''Welcome to Haiti, M'sieu Lavedon.''

They rode through the hot hours of the afternoon. They inspected every acre of the vast farm. The fields, vacated by workers, looked sad and somehow abandoned, as if they were never coming back and the jungle would reclaim the open lands. Still, Tommy could not deny at least a faint sense of excitement and anticipation he felt considering his plan to save at least this crop of sugarcane. Icres would be able to pay his salary.

The still scorching sun rimmed the jagged peaks far inland when Masse led Tommy out of the Icres property and onto the road to Cap Francois. They rode through a cross-hatching of shadows, the road dim and indistinct in places.

Masse spoke abruptly, bringing Tommy from a kind of languid half sleep as they plodded toward the plantation in the enervating blast of the sun. ''Look at this. Company.''

Tommy drew up hard on the bridle and stared at Carbe in the roadway.

''Carbe,'' Tommy said, suddenly troubled and suspicious, ready to accept Marie-Verlaine's assessment of the old man. ''What are you doing here?''

Carbe was carrying the curving egret feathers which he said in a wan, quavering tone were the white plumes of Ayda Weydo, the goddess of love. ''I come in love and concern for you, young master.''

''You've got to stop worrying about me, Carbe,'' Tommy said. ''I'm a big boy. I can take care of myself.''

''We all need help, my son. No one of us can stand alone. It is the first mistake of vanity to believe one can. I want you to know, Damballah walks behind you.''

''Thank you, old one. I'll keep looking over my shoulder.''

Carbe was not offended by the sarcasm. "You need not. Believe me, *he* is there. Damballah spoke to me in the darkness of last night. I was told to warn you. You are living in a house of chaos and confusion. There is the atmosphere of hatred and dread. I was told to warn you against the priestesses of Obi, Marie-Verlaine and her godless daughter."

"Isn't that a strange coincidence, Carbe? You warn me of them, as they warned me against you."

Carbe winced and retreated half a step. His kindly old eyes lit up and he smiled. "You have nothing to fear from Carbe, young master. Damballah is the god of love and I am his disciple. You need never fear me." He shook his gray head. "But in my heart, I am sure you know that."

"It's good to hear, Carbe," Tommy said. "Do you need anything? Can I give you a few gourdes for food?"

"I get all I need from the rich earth of my homeland. I don't need money. I live nowhere. I live everywhere. I am quite wealthy."

Tommy tried to smile, but inwardly he was deeply troubled. Jesus, now he was beginning to buy this voodoo shit. He said, "I'm glad to hear you are well-off, Carbe. But if you are so rich, I wish you'd buy yourself a new suit."

Carbe only retreated, backing away for some distance along the trail before he stepped off the cleared lane and into the depth of jungle undergrowth.

Tommy took off his hat and mopped sweat from his forehead. "Well, I'm damned," he said.

Masse grinned and shrugged. "Maybe you are."

They urged their horses forward, plodding in the blaze of late sunlight and humidity. Tommy could not get old Carbe out of his mind. Masse tried to joke with him, saying that Tommy might well be the next to disappear. But Tommy could not laugh. He barely heard the foreman: all his thoughts turned inward. Carbe was not something you could dismiss easily from your mind. He haunted you. He appeared like a wraith, disappeared like smoke in the wind. Maybe Alabama was more civilized than he had realized.

A faint crackling in the underbrush startled him and he jerked his head up, totally aware of his surroundings and imminent peril. "Ride," he said to Masse. "Get the hell out of here."

Masse's horse lunged forward on the trail, Tommy's immediately behind him. They were exhausted animals after the long day, but from somewhere they gathered strength in this crisis.

A gun exploded from the underbrush. Tommy cursed. He recognized the sound. It was no French-made weapon. It was a Kentucky long rifle.

A bullet whipped past his face and he urged his horse faster. They rounded a curve and Masse slowed slightly, glancing over his shoulder.

"What the hell is that all about?" Masse said.

His heart pounding, Tommy quickly told the big black man about the night in the Alabama backcountry. The way Junior Cobb had first robbed and then tried to knife him but had, instead, died.

"Sounds like self-defense," Masse suggested.

"May sound like it. But it's a blood feud in the mind of that ugly little dwarf hidden back there. I saw them on the pier before we came out to Jade Noir. He had followed me. I suppose he'll follow me until he kills me."

"Maybe you are damned," Masse said.

"Men like Hobart Cobb never give up trying to avenge the death of someone in their family. Self-defense, extenuating circumstances has nothing to do with it. Now he's trying to ambush me here."

Masse straightened. "But he is a stranger in Haiti?"

"As much as I am."

"Then perhaps we can get rid of him."

"You tell me how and we'll certainly try it."

"Well, now that he's missed you, he'll probably go back to Cap Francois and try another day."

"Very comforting."

"It may be more comforting than you know. The trick is to get rid of him. Lose him. Don't let him get back to Cap Francois. Drive him up into the rain forests. Once he's lost, not even Damballah will be able to find him. He'll wander in that jungle until the vultures get him."

"Let's go. Let's cut them off on the road to Cap Francois."

"Them?"

"He has a huge black giant of a bodyguard."

They turned their horses on the trail and rode slowly back

the way they had come. They had covered only a short distance when they saw the dwarf Hobart Cobb and the giant black. They rode their horses desultorily, plodding in the direction of Cap Francois.

"All right," Masse said. "Let's go. A lot of noise. A lot of yelling. They'll react before they stop to think—and we've got them."

They spurred their horses forward, howling like banshees. Hobart Cobb twisted in his saddle and stared at them, his whiskered mouth and strange eyes wide. As Masse had predicted, both Cobb and his bodyguard reacted in panic. Neither stopped to think that if Verder and Masse had guns they would be firing.

Cobb yelled something and both he and the big black man jerked their horses off the trail and into the undergrowth.

"After them, men," Masse howled. "Don't let them get away."

When they reached the place where Cobb and the black had abandoned the open trail, Tommy and Masse swung down from their saddles, ground-tied their horses and sprang into the forest, wailing and beating at the vines and underbrush. Wild animals howled, birds screeched and flew up in terrified coveys. It was as if the jungle itself went insane.

Tommy stared at Masse. This might be a deadly ruse, but it was a game to the bearded man. Screaming, his eyes wild, Masse looked like a headhunter, far more than half-savage. He looked suddenly untamed, merciless, the rage burning in the liquid blackness of his eyes. He looked like he had reverted to the bush of his ancestors and their gods of vengeance.

They had not gone very far when they found the place where the two men had abandoned their horses.

"Well, they think they can move faster afoot," Masse said, searching the saddlebags of the two horses. "Maybe they can in this jungle. We'll try to help them."

They found a machete and a gun on the saddles. They appropriated these weapons, tied the horses to bushes and lunged forward into the tangled forest.

Still yelling and hacking at the underbush with the machete, Masse led Tommy in pursuit of Cobb and the black

for almost an hour, always going upward and herding them toward the rain forests of the uplands.

At last, Masse stopped, breathing through his mouth. "Let's go back. They'll never find their way out of here tonight, and by morning it will be too late for them."

Silently they followed the trace Masse had hacked with the machete. When they reached the place where they'd tied Cobb's horses, Masse took up the reins and led the animals out to the road.

"We might as well take these horses with us," Masse said. "They are excellent animals and I don't think Mr. Cobb and his bodyguard will need them again on this earth. You should be able to sleep much better now."

"Thanks to you and Damballah."

XXVI

The early night settled: a dark, loud shroud. By the time Tommy and Masse returned to Plantation Jade Noir, the entire countryside was blotted out, frantic with exotic cries of mating and dying and attacking. A thousand stars glittered sharply in the uncluttered sky. The plantation villa glowed like some brilliant yellow astral body floating in the ebony blackness. Tommy felt his spirits lift slightly, looking forward to escaping this saddle, getting a shower and looking again upon the sculpted, wanton face of the girl named Jade.

They led Cobb's confiscated animals out to the stables and turned them over to Noab. The youth appeared nervous, but Tommy said nothing to him beyond a short greeting. He did not want to listen to a recitation of Noab's religious fears just now; he could not understand why fear should be such a major part of every religion on earth. And, too, he was already gut sick of the ignorance and superstition that drove and deranged these people, plus he was exhausted by the long day in the saddle, the fast ride along the rough, dark trail, and his need simply to be alone for a little while with his saddle sores and physical exhaustion.

When he and Masse finally entered the formal dining room, they found Icres, Marie-Verlaine, and Jade already at the table. Icres was obviously annoyed that they were late. Tommy wanted to laugh. With all his other woes, Icres found time to resent a breach of etiquette. Tommy glanced skyward. God deliver me. . . .

Tommy sat down gingerly across the table from Jade. He thought he was casual about it, but Masse, Marie-Verlaine,

and Jade all smiled teasingly at him. Only Icres stared straight ahead, saying nothing, but showing his sharp, petulant displeasure at their social dereliction.

While the servants served Tommy's food—a clear chicken broth, broiled sea bass, plantains, and an avocado salad—Tommy amused and delighted himself with what he hoped was veiled appreciation of Jade's beauty. He fervently trusted that he was not being obvious in his delight, but asking any man to ignore the stunning young beauty across this table was to ask the art lover not to enjoy the treasures of the Louvre. At least . . .

"A long day in the saddle, eh, M'sieu?" Marie-Verlaine said in a faintly taunting tone.

"I've been far more comfortable than this," Tommy agreed. "It's been some time since I rode a horse across rough country for twelve hours."

"What did you think of this lovely old estate?" Marie-Verlaine asked.

Tommy smiled, aware that Jade was watching him, too, from beneath long soot-black lashes. Those green eyes caught every twinkle of light on glass and each flicker of the tall candles. He said, "I think the possibilities are unbelievably promising." He glanced toward Jeoffrin Icres. "I also understand your urgent problem, M'sieu Icres. Without labor, a great deal of it, there is not much that can be done."

Icres was sipping his wine. He did not reply, but inclined his head slightly in a gesture of acknowledgement, if nothing else.

"We have an entire new work force arriving," Masse said. "In the next few days."

"If only we can keep them," Marie-Verlaine said.

Masse's deep-set black eyes in his strong, bearded face, fixed on Icres at the head of the table. He ignored the landowner's petulance. Perhaps he had lived with Icres's dudgeons until the sulking no longer impressed him. Or maybe he simply did not care how stupidly the effete man behaved. He said, "M'sieu Lavedon has proposed an idea for saving at least the entire sugarcane crop, no matter how soon the workers begin to disappear."

Masse waited, but Icres was still too offended to display

any interest. He simply took another delicate sip of his wine and waited.

"And how do you plan to do this?" Marie-Verlaine inquired, her dark raven-wing brow tilted.

"The plan is simplicity itself," Masse said. "It is so simple that we just never saw what was right under our own noses. We don't begin to lose new workers for maybe as long as a week."

"It takes that long for Carbe's evil to infect them."

Masse gestured. "Whatever caused them to defect is not the point here. Using them, night and day, in relays, as long as we have them is all that matters. We cut the cane, haul it, grind syrups, sell the rest to the refiners, and load it for them—all within a matter of days. Then the poor wretches can run away, be lured away—"

"Or changed by evil into the walking dead. Zombis," Marie-Verlaine said.

"Zombis," Masse agreed. "But we will not care this time, M'sieu Icres. We will have gotten our labor—more than we could dared to have hoped for before—and you will have a formidable profit. And then"—Masse smiled toward Tommy—"we'll see where M'sieu Lavedon can lead us next. Do you not see the simple elegance of this plan, M'sieu Icres?"

Jeoffrin Icres was pleased. Why in hell shouldn't he be? Delivery of the sugarcane could mean the difference between a seasonal profit and outright ruin. His approval was evident in the way he straightened his slight body in his large, carved chair. But he was still unable to forgive their grave insult of coming late to table. He did nod his head, but expressed no enthusiasm aloud. . . .

Tommy enjoyed a prolonged, tepid shower out at the cistern, letting the water wash away the grime, the exhaustion, and the braised tenderness of saddle pain inside his thighs. The blood began to circulate again. He felt his spirits lift slightly, and his maulstick stirred, almost involuntarily, as Jade insinuated herself again into his mind. God knew she had not been long out of his thoughts since the first time he saw her. His desire had been born when he found her living in this old mansion with her mother and Icres. The desire was rapidly becoming something more arousing, more difficult to

control. Obsession. The need for her obsessed him. He tried to laugh. Obsession was not that much a stranger to him. He fell easily into it, and frequently. Only this time he could not laugh . . .

He toweled off for a long time, trying to keep his mind off his need and what was happening to his staff. Jesus, he wasn't a fifteen-year-old kid gawking after his first female. He'd had women from Boston to Mobile, from New Orleans to Five Points. Yes, and he admitted he'd been through all this and it did not relieve him. Nothing was going to relieve him: his dreams, his fist, his fantasies, nothing except the girl herself.

He had to possess her, and soon. It was that simple.

He wrapped himself in a rough cotton robe and stuck his feet into single-strapped slippers. He clopped across the yard to the diminishedly lighted villa. He stared up at those open, upstairs windows, their fragile drapes waving at him in the night breezes like wanton kerchiefs in the fingers of unseen *filles de joie*.

He scowled in the darkness. Which was Jade's bedroom? Which her mother's, and Icres's? How could he find Jade's room, and if he did, would it be under surveillance of her mother? And if he tiptoed through the late night upper corridor and into Jade's room, what then? Would her screams bring the house down upon his head? After all, no matter how sophisticated her smile appeared, how wanton the promise in those green eyes, she was, nevertheless, a seventeen-year-old girl whose mother had never permitted her off a tight leash. Everything worth anything in life was a gamble—the dearer it was, the greater the risk and peril. If a man was afraid to chance ruin, he didn't deserve the rewards, and the gods knew there were treasures there. The oldest cliche known to needful man was "Nothing ventured, nothing gained." And there were damned good reasons why this had become a truism. You reached out and you took, or you lay back with nothing but unfulfilled longings and self-hatred. But what if he went stealthily into that room and she did scream, a seventeen-year-old child? Females were not predictable at that age. Maybe they never were, but you could never count in advance what a seventeen-year-old would do. Most of the time, they didn't know themselves until it was too late. He

could go rutting after this porcelain-skinned doll with green eyes and lose everything he had here. It wasn't much, but as a matter of truth it was all he had at the moment, his only hope of making anything before he had to run again. . . .

He entered his own bedroom, closed the corridor door and locked it. Against himself. A locked door should remind him of what an indiscretion might cost him in this country, in this villa.

He loosened the robe and hurled it toward a wing chair half across the room. A maid had turned down the light covers on his bed. His pillows gleamed brightly white and he yawned helplessly. He thanked the Furies who passed also as his gods for the fact that he was too exhausted, too beaten and saddle sore to go prowling, looking for Jade in the night. He blew out the candles on the bedside tables.

He toppled across the mattress on his belly and lay naked with his nose pressed into the sweet-scented bed linens. He yawned again, so deeply it was painful in his belly. God he was tired. Thank God he was tired.

He remained unmoving, his eyes and his behind burning savagely. He tried to concentrate on the darkness, tried to will himself to sleep. As exhausted as he was, it was not that easy. Jesus knew, nothing was ever easy, and getting that lovely succubus off his mind, even for a little while, might well be the most difficult thing he had ever done to this moment. His body kept playing tricks on him; his subconscious mind ordered bodily reactions that he tried to deny and refuse in the conscious part of his brain.

He lay unmoving, scarcely breathing. He was haunted by her in the soft, sweet-scented darkness. This tropical dark was no place to practice puritanical inhibitions. Restrictions were no part of his corpus, and they were totally stupid on this heated, trade-wind-swept island. Everything taunted him and tormented him. He was haunted by the promise in those green eyes, the tipping of that tongue against those full lips, by the very smell of jasmine, the flower of romance, the smell pervading this room. The distant pulsing of those voodoo drums were their own kind of torment, beating in rhythm with his roused heart, beating incessantly and never stopping to rest. The shrill piping of night birds in the hedges, the rustling of small animals on the balcony and in the vines

creeping up those outer walls. Everything conspired against him in the heated darkness of this tropical night, and worst of all were his own errant compulsions, stronger than his underdeveloped willpower or his ill-trained discipline.

He fell asleep at last, exhausted by his own needs and dreams. The dark night continued loud with birds and drums and prowling creatures. He did not know how long he slept, or what wakened him. It was a subtle change in the very atmosphere of his room. There was a crackling charge of electricity in the air, as if just before a violent storm. He no longer smelled the cool fresh linens. Not even the jasmine was as pervasive. He smelled a faint and yet unforgettable cologne, the warmth of a young body, the musk of dark, shampooed hair, the sweet breath of the very young. He opened his eyes slowly, thinking he was dreaming anyhow.

Jade lay close beside him. His eyes opened wider. He saw her black hair spilled out across the mattress beside him, the ceramic-smooth glaze of her face, the unutterable loveliness of her features, and even then he could not believe it. She wore only a diaphanous silk and lace gown which whispered against the rises and planes of her shapely body.

When Jade saw that he was awake, she smiled, faintly and pleasurably. She whispered. "Bonsoir, M'sieu. *Couchez-vous avec moi*?"

For a long time they said nothing. They shared the same compulsions, the same desires turned obsession; there was no need for words.

"You sleep naked," she whispered against his face. "I like that. I really like that. It makes me all wet and hot to look at you, even lying on your belly."

He rolled over toward her, and his rod, like something released on taut springs, lunged upward between them, quivering rigid.

"My God," she whispered. "Oh, my God."

"I've never wanted anyone so badly in all my life."

Jade accepted this matter-of-factly. She had not doubted this: She had that assurance and arrogance of youth, multiplied by the power of two, and reaffirmed every time she glanced in a mirror. Of course he wanted her. Every man wanted her, even the effete and impotent Icres wanted her.

The only important point was that she wanted him as fiercely, and now that she had seen him naked like this, her need was ecstatic.

Jade writhed and slithered out of the whistling silk gown and kicked it away in the darkness. "Now," she whispered. "Now, that's better."

She kissed him with open-mouthed abandon, her mouth parted, her darting tongue suckling at him, tasting him, rousing him. He moved his hands along the perfection of her back to the taut fullness of her hips. He found her moving down there in an involuntary kind of little waltz. He smiled and drew her over upon him. "Oh, my God," she whispered in sweet agony. "It's so big. I'm afraid it's going to kill me. But I cannot think of a better way to die."

"Nor can I," he answered, breathless. With her body still sprawled atop his, he settled her slowly and yet unrelentingly upon him. She cried out and then sank her teeth into the soft flesh of his inner shoulder and bit down fiercely.

"Oh, dear God," she wailed. "Do it. Do it, and never stop doing it."

Tommy returned to reality after an exhausted, brief, and fitful slumber to find Jade's moist lips on his. She could not love him enough. Desires that once were dreams were now a thrilling reality. Something was turned on inside her, something heated and spewing, like a fountain. Now that she had started, she never wanted to stop. She was insatiable.

She would not let him rest more than a few minutes. Like every wanton born since Lilith, she knew ways to rouse him, even when he was too tired to be roused again. There was nothing she would not do to excite him, to bring that great lance into view, ready to plunge again.

"My God," he whispered. "You'll kill me."

"I hope so," she spoke against his face. "I never want anyone else to have you. . . . If I catch any other woman even looking at you, I'll burn her eyes out with a poker."

"You are an untamed little vixen, aren't you?"

"Surely, you didn't think I was one of those bland vessels like other women, to fall dutifully on my back in the missionary position—"

He laughed tiredly. "What do you know about the missionary position?"

"I told you. I am unlike any other woman you ever met."

"I'm already convinced of that."

"And you would do well to remember it." She laughed without mirth. "For I am a jealous goddess, and shall wreak vengeance upon your children and your children's children."

"The poor little devils," Tommy said, smiling.

"Don't you laugh at me," Jade said. "Don't you dare laugh at me."

"Not even when you say something funny?"

"I was never more serious."

"There's nothing serious about being in love. You're acting like a selfish child. You're already looking for trouble."

"I am not. I'm just warning you."

"Well, don't. What you're suggesting is that I can't wait to fall into some other woman's bed. That's not true. In fact, when I leave you, I may never want another woman."

"You're never going to leave me." She closed her hips on him, grinding them. "I'm going to keep you here like this forever."

"And when we don't come out of my bedroom, what then?"

"I don't care about any of the rest of them. Except my mother. She would kill me. For more reasons than distress. She wants you. I could see it in her face."

"I didn't see anything like that."

"You didn't look at her."

"I told you, I'll never look at another woman."

"No. I'm telling you. It would be too bad. For you. And for her. If you did."

"You've got to be careful. It would be unpleasant—for all of us—if your mother found out."

"Unpleasant?" Jade laughed, moving on him, slowly and tantalizingly. "It would be a catastrophe."

"Then you've got to be careful. You must be most careful coming to this room to me."

Jade laughed casually. "We have nothing to fear there. Nothing to worry about. I shall come to you—as I did tonight—through the walls."

Tommy stared at her. "You're joking."

"I never joke about my need for you and your loving. There are secret passages weaving all through this old house—I know all of them. I have played in them since I was a child. I move freely, where I wish, when I wish. And God knows, I wish to be with you. Like this."

"Passages . . . Don't you fear who else might use them?"

"I'm not afraid of anyone else. I thought you knew that. It's not even that I'm afraid of my mother. I used to be. I'm not anymore. Less now that I've had this with you than ever. I just don't want the poor soul upset. . . . I'm all she has you know."

"She's rich."

"No. She's not rich. Nor am I. But I must be. Of course, if you hope to keep me, you must help me get rich. Rich as am empress. Nothing else is good enough for me. I have only few needs, but all are vital. The need of you. The need of fucking like this. The need of money, great barrels of money." Her voice lowered, chilled. "The only choice that I can see myself making over you is for the money—and only because without the money I am nothing. . . ."

Until the dark hour before dawn, Jade lay close in his arms. He thought she never would, but she tired at last, toppling beside him like a sleepy child. But she would not sleep. She would not let him sleep. "If we fall asleep, we would be lying here naked and helpless at high noon. . . . I must leave you before dawn, even if I hate the thought of it."

She began to talk to him drowsily, but persistently. She told him how her mother had sent her to Paris to a convent when she was ten. At first it had been hell: a wild, untamable little girl in a strange land. Not even the Creole patois she spoke was intelligible to the French, who refused to communicate when she was not fluent in their own tongue. "Jesus, how I hated them. I hated them all. But the sisters. I hated them with the greatest passion. I made them pay for any discomfort and unhappiness they caused me. I'm sure they wished to their Roman Catholic gods they had never seen me, or crossed my path."

It took a long time, but they taught her the pure, lovely French language. The well-meaning nuns and priests tried to exorcize the evils and the superstitions and the voodoo reli-

gion from her mind and heart, even though they finally realized they were dealing with the willful daughter of a Haitian *mamaloi*, a *mere savanne*, a voodoo priestess. They tried because it was all they knew, and because they felt it was God's will that they try.

But deep inside, her desires remained those of her people, who behaved in ways seemingly uncivilized and unprincipled to the devout Catholics. They were unable even to understand that the people she came from acted with mindless ferocity to remove or destroy what they hated, or to satisfy the fierce lusts in their hearts. They behaved in savage cunning and jungle amorality as old as their race.

She laughed, telling him how they dressed her in sensible shoes and stockings, in crinoline and lace, how they forced her into molds that were alien and hateful to her. They never learned that she was most dangerous to them when she smiled most docilely at them and followed their strict rules most explicitly.

At last her mother relented and brought her home to Cap Francois. Marie-Verlaine made an alliance with Jeoffrin Icres. She now had a secure and lovely home for her daughter. Jade came racing back to Haiti. All the layers of gentility the nuns had smoothed upon her, she ripped away. She thrust the rigidity of Catholicism from her like rent garments, and she plunged back into the savagery of her roots. For a long time she ran wild. She submerged herself, like a dog in hot mud, into the old barbarity, the lusts and strengths and weaknesses and uncontrolled passions of her native land. She threw off the last vestiges of polite civilization and all repressive Christian credos.

"Tommy," she whispered, stirring on the rumpled sheeting. "How I love you. The touch of you. The hardness. The wonder. Your lovemaking drives me out of my mind. I adore you. Even if you were never huge and hard again, I'd be content with you as I am this moment."

He laughed, yawning. "Isn't that funny?"

"I warned you. Don't laugh at me."

"No. No. It's only that I'll bet that's one lie—I'd love you anyway—that every woman on earth has told some man at some time or other—and convinced herself and him that she means it. But it's the biggest lie of all. I'm sure lovers would

try—I'm convinced they have tried—and do try—but the hard, unhappy truth is that something dies, and all that is left is that lie. That hypocrisy."

"You are a fool to say that," she said. "A fool to believe it."

He half rose, supporting his body on his elbow. He gazed down into her incredibly lovely face, the tea-rose skin, the slanted green eyes, the dark lashes, the slender nose, and full sensuous lips. Those perfect features were contorted now with an animality which enhanced their exotic beauty. He had no right words to say to her. Perhaps there were none. He whispered her name over and over, with the rhythm of the muted drums, quieting now before daybreak. Each time his warm breath caressed her ear, he felt her snuggling down closer to him. He felt her fingers moving in his hair, pulling his head down to her. He felt her nails dig into the corded muscles of his back; he felt them reach boldy for him, closing on his hardness one more time, demanding. His own hands explored the full, high-standing loveliness of her breasts. Her fevered lips sought his and she clung to him. He drew her closer and her eyes closed and she opened herself to him.

"My good God," he whispered. "It'll be daybreak. They'll find us here. Like this."

"I cannot think of a better way to die. And anyway, you cannot escape me until you do it. I will not let you go."

XXVII

When Tommy struggled up from the black abyss of exhaustion, he felt as if he had to fight off fetters that shackled him to deepest, sweetest sleep. He made the long journey upward unwillingly. He felt himself thrusting upward from bottomless depths into which he had plunged deeper and deeper, until he fought for air against the inexorable force that entangled and imprisoned him. His lungs were bursting. He must fill them or suffocate. But he didn't want to make the effort. It was all too much trouble. All he wanted to do was to sink further into the warm, thickly liquid green mire where he could sleep forever.

Slowly he surrendered to reality. The sun streamed in saffron and silver lances through the windows, piercing his eyeballs and puncturing the crown of his head. He had a hangover unlike anything he had ever experienced because he hadn't had a drink last night; the only intoxication had been the madness and violence of Jade. Anxiously he reached out and found the rumpled bed empty beside him. Jade was gone. Thank God, she wouldn't be caught here with him even if they had plummeted into helpless sleep.

He moved on the bed, aware that he was far more beaten than he had been when he came in from twelve hours in the saddle. His mind flashed back through the eternal, scented night. God knows, Jade had reduced him to a weakened, debilitated, and enfeebled shadow of himself. He had barely strength to dress himself, none, God knew, to oversee this huge and rundown farm.

At first he thought the jungle drums had moved deafeningly

close here in his bedroom with him, or his own heart was out of kilter, ready to burst. Then he realized it was Masse, pounding on his door facing.

Yawning helplessly, Tommy swung his legs off the side of his bed and slumped there, the entire weight of his torso pressing on his belly. "All right," he shouted. "Stop beating the house down. I'm up. I'm up. I'll be there."

Masse's voice taunted him through the thick facing. "I was afraid you had died during the night—though I'd never heard of a case where a man died of saddle sores."

"You go to hell."

"I'll meet you there for breakfast."

It was eight o'clock by the ornate Swiss-made grandfather clock in the downstairs foyer when Tommy yawned his way down the semicircular mahogany wood stairs. The ancient clock was a prized treasure. It had been imported by the original owners of Jade Noir. It had survived the insanity of revolution. It was Jeoffrin Icres's pride and joy, and he set the weights and adjusted the chains religiously every night before he went up to bed. Icres was a man who didn't have a great deal of excitement left in his life. The hell of it was, he was like a fruit pulp, a drained hulk, a man totally enervated and depleted. He was somewhat more alive than the walking dead, the zombis, but not much, when winding a clock at night was a daily highlight.

Tommy could hear voices and movement in the informal dining room and he paused, leaning against the doorjamb, before he entered the bright sunlit room.

Tommy stopped just inside the informal dining room, faintly surprised to find Jeoffrin Icres seated at the head of the linen-covered table. Tommy had been told by Masse definitely, but in strict confidence, that Icres usually slept until noon. Yet here he was, formally attired in his white suit, white shirt, and pale string tie, presiding over the early morning meal. The glistening white table was set with Haitian coffee in a silver urn, china cups and plates, bowls of peeled and sliced fruit, bananas, orange slices, sliced mangoes. Slabs of freshly baked bread were piled high in cane baskets. There were plates of cheese. Masse sat stiffly near the foot of the table and Tommy sat at Icres's right, where his place had

been set. Young servants moved at once to serve him, pouring coffee, opening the napkin-encased hot bread.

Icres greeted him, slightly more civil than he had been the night before. Tommy supposed when a man had only etiquette to occupy his mind, being late to table could assume an unnatural importance. This led in a kind of stream of consciousness to his wondering if Icres had always been like this, otherworldly, a mincing shell. He remembered that Jade had said last night that Marie-Verlaine, many years ago, made arrangements with Icres to live in his home with her daughter. Now, Marie-Verlaine oversaw the housekeeping, but what had her tasks been all those years ago? Was mother like daughter? Had she enfeebled Icres in her bed and left him an impotent husk to mince about this old house afraid to assert himself? Simply too weak and tired to care anymore?

Tommy drank his coffee, spreading a soft cheese on a slab of hot bread. He glanced toward Icres. Was Icres's impotence the reason why someone was able to remove workers from this farm at will and without fear? What a way station it could be for the illegal slave trade.

He felt himself growing warm, warmer than the coffee would make him, with a body heat that the morning breezes whipping curtains at the wide-open windows could not soothe. A way station on the slave trafficking road. Even farfetched it made a hell of a lot more sense than their being stolen in the night to become zombis in the hills, forever lost. That made no sense at all, not even when he remembered that Carbe had cured inch-thick whip weals on his own back. There was a hell of a lot more to voodoo than Tommy cared to investigate, but stolen men made more sense than walking dead.

He replaced his fragile cup in its saucer and stared straight ahead in a kind of trance of his own. He was barely aware that he whispered the name aloud. "Sardou . . ."

"I beg your pardon," Icres said.

"No. No. I'm sorry. I was thinking out loud." Behind his polite smile, Tommy's mind raced. Sardou. He had not been involved in any longtime slave stealing down here, but he might well be its new kingpin. He certainly had moved about Haiti without any trouble with the government, and only crooks were trusted by crooks. He needed to find Sardou for more reasons than the workers stolen from Plantation Jade

Noir. Sardou had betrayed him, had stolen Lily, and since Sardou's sexual preferences ran more to little boys than to females, God knew what Sardou had done with Lily. And Sardou had that gold. He had set Tommy up so that he was practically forced to remove the gold from the ship and then, when it was safe, Sardou calmly moved in and appropriated it. The bastard. He had to find him.

"Sardou is the name of a slave trader. I know that he plans to steal blacks here in Haiti and sell them in the United States, in the south, through a broker in Cuba."

"And what do you think this might have to do with us?" Icres inquired in a flat and disinterested tone. Tommy had no idea what in God's world might arouse Icres's fires and passions if stolen workers did not.

"I don't know. But I suspect quite a lot. If I could find the plantation that Sardou bought on the seacoast, I might be able to learn some answers that might profit you—and me."

"A seaside plantation. There must be hundreds still standing. There are uncounted thousands of miles of accessible coastline in Haiti, M'sieu Lavedon."

"But with the right questions, M'sieu Icres, to the right executives in this administration—"

"You expect me to involve myself in a matter like this?" Icres seemed to withdraw to the very back of his chair. His thin fists gripped the chair arms until his knuckles whitened.

Tommy watched Jeoffrin Icres, shocked. The man's thin face went pallid and almost rigid about his mouth and along his jawline, and it seemed a heroic effort for him to control his trembling.

Tommy glanced at Masse, who merely sat unmoving, unmoved. Nothing surprised the big bearded man in this place anymore. Though he was the one who suggested that Icres might be of some assistance to Tommy in finding Sardou, he displayed no visible shock that the plantation owner withdrew, refusing out of hand, in advance.

"It might well be of greater profit to you than to me," Tommy said, his voice urgent because he already anticipated defeat: Icres wasn't going to help him, not even to save his own plantation. Still, Tommy could not give up without one last pitch.

Icres shook his head again. "No. No. I'm sorry, M'sieu

Lavedon. I most regret that you asked, because I don't like having to disappoint you. But I could not make official inquiries of this administration."

Tommy exhaled heavily. "I only need to know where his farm is. I could handle it from there, but without that knowledge, I'm stopped."

Icres winced. "I know what you want, M'sieu. I understand. But there is one problem maybe you have not considered. This Sardou. He may hold his property under an assumed name, under a concealing corporate name. It is not a simple matter of inquiry. It could become quite involved. Even quite dangerous. I simply cannot assume the responsibility of inquiry. I cannot. As I tried to convey to you earlier, my own position here is too precarious. I'm sorry."

After a long moment of taut silence, Icres spoke in his whining tenor. "As I told you, I am a mulatto in a black-governed nation. This is a country where mulattos are simply vanishing. . . . As a mulatto, I am barely tolerated. I am permitted a great deal more than most *hommes du coleur*. I am allowed to own this property. That could all change quickly if I ask the wrong questions, if I draw hostile attention to myself. I hope you understand. I would not want to stir anything up, to start something in motion that I could not stop. Oh, no. This can be done in the most innocent-appearing ways. You'll have to forgive me. I'm sorry."

"Naturally, if you do not wish to get involved, I will not insist."

"Thank you."

"I asked only because this Sardou might be behind the kidnapping of your workers."

"I understand that."

"If we could find him, stop him, we might stop this wholesale theft of workers."

"I understand all that. However, it is a price I must pay. If M'sieu Sardou is kidnapping my workers, then that is a price I must pay. I also understand that."

Tommy sighed and said nothing more. He was aware that one of the house servants bent over Masse's shoulder and whispered something to him. Masse nodded, placed his napkin beside his bowl of fruit and cheese and left the room.

He managed to move to harmless conversation with Icres,

but it required a massive inner struggle to keep the contempt he felt for the plantation owner from showing in his face. Tommy suddenly felt that if anyone pulled down Icres's pants they'd find this mulatto had no balls. . . .

In the brief exchange of polite inanities, both Marie-Verlaine and Jade entered the informal dining room. They took their places at the table. From under hooded eyes Tommy saw that Jade's tea-rose face looked pale, but at the same time radiant and seething with inner vigor. He smiled to himself, wondering how long before he'd be looking and behaving like Jeoffrin Icres?

Icres welcomed the ladies and, with Tommy, stood beside his chair until they were seated. They spoke about the weather, about the farm, about the vague plans for the day's activities.

As they talked, Masse returned to the informal dining room. He walked to his place at the table but did not sit down. He stood patiently until the niceties and trivialities had been exchanged. Then he said in a low, puzzled tone, "The youth Noab. He disappeared in the night."

A stunned silence settled over the room. For some moments, no one moved or said anything. Marie-Verlaine shook her head and her almond-shaped eyes brimmed with tears. "The poor frightened boy," she said.

"Oh, damn," Icres said from the head of the table. He sat gripping his napkin in his almost translucent fist. "This is intolerable. Intolerable. Noab has been like a son. Like one of the family. He has been with us—how long has the boy been here?"

"More than five years," Masse said in a flat tone. "One did not even think of the kidnappings as coming so close to the house, to the people who have been here so long."

"It would be clear to you, my dear man," Marie-Verlaine said, "if you would face the facts of Damballah *ouanga*. Black magic. Evil."

"It doesn't make sense that Carbe could lure Noab away. The boy was scared to death of him."

"It would be easy enough if you understood the powerful evil of Damballah and his followers. I have tried to tell you of the dangers," Marie-Verlaine said. "But you are too civi-

lized, too educated, too sophisticated to heed my warnings of great danger, great peril.''

Masse sighed heavily. ''I still cannot credit all the black magic and the superstition, Marie-Verlaine. But I cannot dispute you this time. Carbe may in some way be behind Noab's disappearance. The only reason I suspect this might be true is because Noab has not been the same since we met Carbe at the crossroads a few days ago. . . . Noab was terrified after having been forced to look old Carbe full in the face. I thought it was foolish of Noab then, and I think it foolish now, but I admit the strange workings of the mind, especially the superstitious mind.''

Icres sat slumped and disconsolate at the head of the table.

Marie-Verlaine said, ''I do not wish to alarm you, M'sieu Icres. I am not trying to convert you, or Masse, or to make either of you believe in werewolves and bane. But I believe Carbe is the devil incarnate, and I believe he is becoming bolder. He must be, to come here to the house itself and steal a young boy away for the zombi.'' Her voice sank to a whisper. ''It is a fearful omen. Terrible things are about to happen and soon. I have prayed to the god Obi, and tried to invoke the magic of Petro against Carbe. But I am helpless. I am only a woman, a *mere savanne* against a man as old as eternity and as evil as blackest sin.''

After a long time, Masse spoke in a stark, chilled way, as if his words were in incredible conflict with his mind, his intelligence, his lifetime of learning. ''Well, I am forced to admit that this Carbe has a fearful influence and much power among the blacks. Don Zaccone's hirelings would kill him, but they are afraid. He is just a skinny old man, and yet they are afraid to believe that. Carbe has indeed been active lately. . . . Well, it's time for me to take action, even when I don't believe in the enemy I am fighting. I came upon this mountain village where Carbe has gathered hundreds of followers. Perhaps M'sieu Lavedon and I should ride up there at once. If Carbe has Noab, perhaps it is not too late to prevail upon him to return the boy to us.''

''If Carbe has him,'' Marie-Verlaine said, her mouth twisting, ''the boy is a zombi by now. A zombi. It is too late.''

''It's a chance we must take,'' Masse decided. ''We cannot sit here any longer, and do nothing.''

Icres leaned forward, shaken. "I warn you, Masse. Do not use violence against the person of the old *papaloi* Carbe. In God's name, do not."

"You have my word on this, M'sieu," Masse said. Tommy stared at Icres: the hulk of a man was trembling, his eyes wide with a terror Icres himself did not acknowledge. Tommy exhaled. What he was looking at was an educated, intelligent man, weakened physically and mentally and snared by the superstitions around him, unable to believe, afraid to doubt. Masse's voice was almost soothing. "Perhaps Lavedon and I can talk to Carbe. The old man seems friendly toward Lavedon—"

"Cross yourself, M'sieu Lavedon," Marie-Verlaine urged in a frightened voice. "May the gods of Obi protect you from the old satan."

Masse continued speaking quietly and with great calm, as if Marie-Verlaine had not interrupted him. "Carbe might return the youth Noab to us as a favor to Lavedon."

"Cross yourself, M'sieu Masse," Marie-Verlaine said. "Cross yourself when you speak such heresy. . ."

Nowhere else on earth is there the serene, hazed silences and translucence as in early morning rural Haiti. The cool freshness which has spread down from the jungles and rain forests has not yet been burned away by the blaze of Caribbean sun. A sharp clarity is somehow exaggerated by the mists, so everything stands out in relief—distances appear lessened, odors and perfumes are more pungent on the gentle breezes. And forever, in the distant background, rear the shadowed mountain ridges.

Masse and Tommy saddled their own horses this morning for the long ride. The barns and stables were desperately silent, with frightened blacks knotted together against the walls.

It was a rough ride climbing upward into the mauve mountains, even in the breeze-cooled morning. It would be tougher as the sun rose. They soon left the cleared fields of Plantation Jade Noir, land being inexorably reclaimed by the creeping jungle, going into the forests, across open mesas and down into blue valleys. There were no roads to follow. At times

they plodded along mule trails that were growing more indistinct with every rain and every growing season.

As they climbed, slowly but without stopping, Tommy saw that Masse was unusually quiet and extraordinarily watchful and alert. He wanted to ask the bearded man what he was looking for in these forests, but the very way Masse sat in his saddle, as if braced against questions, stopped him.

Tommy himself found little to hold his attention, or to alarm him. As they plodded upward, Tommy remembered Hobart Cobb and the giant black bodyguard. They had chased the two up this way. Perhaps it was for these lost and frantic men Masse searched, but Tommy didn't believe that. Masse had told him that strangers lost in these forests never lasted very long.

Masse did not slacken the steady pace, though sometimes, on almost perpendicular rises, they had to dismount and lead the horses. They passed a high, lost waterfall spilling thunderously downward through huge boulders and thick green vines, lilies, and trees. Tommy was lulled into a kind of half sleep; he was already exhausted after the eternal night clasped in Jade's arms and legs and heated body. He exhaled heavily, remembering. He decided he had never entered a more peaceful region than high up here above the squalor and poverty of the Haitian towns and cities. He kept one eye fixed on Masse's broad back ahead of him on the narrow and winding trail. What evil could exist up here in this blissful green paradise?

"God, it's beautiful, isn't it?" He called ahead to Masse.

The big man glanced back over his shoulder, something odd in his dark, bearded face, but he did not answer.

The higher they climbed, the more slowly they had to move. The path, when there was one, was either a steep ascent or precipitous descent, the land around them unchanging: dense and silent and shadowed. At times the overhead density of foliage blotted out the sun, and for long periods the trail was indistinguishable. This did not slow Masse; the big man plodded relentlessly upward, always seeming to search, forever silent and watchful. Tommy thanked the gods Damballah and Obi and even Jesus Christ that Masse was his guide. Without Masse, he was as good as dead. He admitted

he could never find his way back to Icres's plantation, even with Jade waiting like a holy grail down there for his return.

He looked about in the hushed cathedral quiet that possessed the hills. Breezes whispered in the towering umbrellas of mahogany, ironwood, and ceiba trees arched together and soaring toward the clear white skies. What seemed radiant streaks of lightning flashed through the undergrowth as swarms of nervous parakeets flushed upward in the crystal air, green, yellow, blue, and cerise.

He began to understand faintly how the natives of this place might become converted to the religion of pastoral gods. Damballah the green serpent began to make some kind of perverted sense. These people, ignorant of the world, believed what they saw and let their reasonings form the images of their gods.

When Tommy began to believe they would stumble and fall from exhaustion, or climb to the most rugged heights of black mountains, but that they would never find Carbe's village, they rode out into a clearing.

Within the cleared, hard-packed clay flooring of the village milled a crush of silent people. There were twenty to forty thatched huts and people spilled from all of them. These blacks streamed, like ants to a honeyed hub, toward a fire in a wide pit in the center of the settlement.

There was an atmosphere of celebration raging through the area. The pleasure did not even diminish when someone spied Masse and the white man and cried out a warning.

Several men took up spears and approached the strangers warily. Masse nodded toward Tommy and they swung down from their saddles, standing with reins in their hands.

Masse raised his hand, palm outward in a gesture of friendship and of submission. He smiled, and in the strange Creole patois native to these people he asked for Carbe.

One of the guards stepped forward. "Carbe?" He shook his head.

"He is not here?" Masse persisted.

The man shook his head and the others mumbled in agreement. They went on standing, legs apart, arms entwined about their lances.

Masse spread his hands. Then, still smiling, he asked about Noab. He described the youth, explained that the boy had

been missing from Plantation Jade Noir since the night before. Again the guards exchanged glances and shook their heads. They were such simple men that one believed them because they seemed too naive to dissemble and lie.

Masse nodded, saying they had only come in peace seeking Carbe or some word on the whereabouts of the youth Noab. He thanked them for their kindness and asked if this day was a holy festival.

The man in the forefront nodded, inviting them into the village.

The hundreds of people stood up, put aside whatever they were doing and watched in silence as the two men and their horses were escorted toward the fire pit in the center of the village.

Twenty feet from the roaring fire, Tommy stopped as if poled. He stared at the pit, at the men and women around it. He jerked his gaze away to escape the nightmare at the pit and recognized Hobart Cobb's giant black bodyguard trussed to a post driven into the hard ground.

He had to force his gaze back to the pit. A man's naked body had been skewered to a spit which was supported on two tripods and was being slowly turned over the blazing fire.

The man was white. A white dwarf. Hobart Cobb had been slain, his throat cut so his head lolled loosely every time the spit was turned. Cobb's eyes were wide and staring in death, and body fats dripped into the fire, making it flare and reflecting in the black eyes of the people crouched, waiting hungrily at the brink of the fiery pit.

Tommy sagged against his horse, ill.

XXVIII

The gut sickness trailed after Tommy as he and Masse returned downhill from the mountain village. The sun was high and westering, the afternoon was sweltering hot, the breezes seemed to have died. They rode the more open trial used by the villagers in traveling to the coast and Cap Francois, but even this path was overgrown, potholed, deep-rutted in places and indistinct in others. For a long time Masse said nothing. Tommy appreciated the silence. He was too ill to make conversation or even listen to the sound of another human voice. He kept swallowing back the hot bile that gushed up into his throat. It was hard, even after all he had faced in this strange universe, to believe the evil men did to each other. In his nightmare, he would forever see Hobart Cobb's large head, almost severed, attached to his searing body only by cartilage, a thin strip of his spine, and tendons, the eyes wide in death, flopping oddly with every turn of the spit. His stomach closed in a spasm and he bit back soured fluids. Jesus, would he ever forget?

"They'll probably eat his brains," Masse said after a long time.

"Oh, Jesus Christ. I'm sick in my guts. Do we have to talk about it?"

"The brains are considered a gourmet delicacy," Masse said.

"Do they think they will kill the black man, too?"

"I don't think so. Depends on how hungry they are. They might hold him to sell him to the slave traders."

"Was that place really Carbe's village?"

"None of them belong to Carbe. The people are his followers."

"Is Carbe a cannibal?"

Masse shrugged. "They all are. They are now. If they were not before the revolution twenty-five years ago, they are now. Human flesh has a delicate taste . . . so they tell me."

Tommy glanced at the big bearded man and shrugged.

"When you get hungry enough, you eat men and women and even children," Masse said. "First, they ate the dogs and the cats, then the rats from the gutters and latrines, and then the white people who were fools enough to stay after the French pulled out. Sometimes there are many reasons why one becomes a cannibal."

Tommy wiped the back of his hand across his face. He knew his cheeks were pallid and that his eyes must reflect the fever inside him.

Masse laughed. "Makes Alabama seem more like Eden every minute. Eh?"

Tommy didn't say anything. Man's inhumanity to man was as rampant in *civilized* Alabama as in this poor, chaotic, and starving country. It took different forms, that was all. Maybe eating a man's flesh wasn't the worst thing one man could do to another.

They rode in silence for some moments. At last Tommy glanced over his shoulder at Masse, squinting his eyes against the sun. "Did you really think we'd find Carbe up there?"

Masse considered this for some seconds. "I didn't think so. But I didn't know. Losing Noab brings it all very close. Right into the house at Jade Noir. I couldn't take a chance. But no, I didn't really think Carbe would be up there, or that he had anything to do with the disappearance of Noab or the other Jade Noir Plantation workers."

"Then why did you let them believe you did?"

"Because, I had no proof that the old man was not stealing people in the night. All I had telling me it wasn't true was common sense. There was that one slight chance . . . And, anyway, did you see how badly Marie-Veraline *wanted* us to believe Carbe is behind all this?"

"She is certainly convinced."

"Yes. Isn't she? That's what she would have you and Icres

believe, anyhow. It would make it all that much easier for her and that brat-from-hell daughter from the darkest pockets of her womb."

"You really hate them, don't you?"

Masse shrugged. "Let's say I don't trust them. I mistrust the mother as I would a rabid dog, and the daughter I am as cautious toward as I might be toward a roused fer-de-lance."

Tommy winced. "Why do you mistrust them?"

"For a very good reason. I believe, and I have believed for a long time, months before you came here, back when the disappearances first started at Jade Noir, I have been convinced that somehow Marie-Verlaine and her daughter are secretly behind those kidnappings."

"My God, do you mean Marie-Verlaine is using black magic?"

"Hell no. Nothing so exotic. What I believe is a hell of a lot simpler and more straightforward than that. Marie-Verlaine and Jade, I believe, are selling those poor devils to slave traders and hoarding the cash."

Tommy caught his breath. Into his mind flashed the fevered image of the naked Jade lying in his arms and talking about money. She would forsake him for only one thing. Money. He felt as if he had been abruptly struck in the solar plexus, but he did not speak of Jade.

"Why didn't you report your suspicions to Icres?"

Masse laughed, a bitter sound. "That impotent mantis? If I wanted to be fired I could speak against Marie-Verlaine or her daughter. Old Icres has been enamored of Marie-Verlaine for more years than he probably remembers since his brain has been boiled to mush. And when the wench Jade returned from Paris, he went out of his gourd—trying to love her when he was already a wrung out and impotent shell. One might think it was child molestation, but it was anything else. That girl led him on like some jezebel far beyond her years."

Tommy swallowed back more bile, but continued to stare ahead along the trail downhill.

"I have never even been able to confront Marie-Verlaine herself," Masse said. "Because to do that at Jade Noir in its present climate I would have to have irrefutable evidence. I've never had that. I've never had any proof. Only my suspicions grow stronger every day."

Tommy spoke at last, trying to inch away from the dangerous topic of conversation. "You were searching for something on the trail up there this morning. What were you looking for?"

"What I have been looking for for all these months. A corral. There has to be hidden somewhere in these forests—and within a few miles of Jade Noir Plantation—a corral where these shackled blacks could be herded like animals to await the slave traders."

"My God!" The words burst from Tommy's lips. "Of course that's the answer. It's got to be the answer."

Masse laughed at him. "Sure it has. Only I have no proof. I have been unable to find the corral. Without it, I have nothing."

Tommy sat silently for a long time, plodding downward through the forests. He wanted to offer to help Masse, but he didn't even know how he might broach the subject. He said, "Maybe I could talk to Jade. She seems quite enamored. She might trust me."

Masse swore loudly and bitterly. "Enamored? That tart is enamored of every male with a stalk and balls in his scrotum. Don't feel flattered or set apart that she appears smitten with you. Simply know you are another male she sees as a conquest. . . . Oh, no, I'd like any help I could get, but I would not involve you with that dangerous harlot."

Tommy exhaled heavily. "Either you truly hate her, or you have been rejected there, Masse. You sound too bitter, too involved."

"Believe me, I am not involved with either of them. When I want a woman I want one who thinks to satisfy me and only me. I don't want to join an army of idiots. Yes, Jade is young. She is beautiful. Few men have ever seen Jade without wanting her. I might want her—with my cock—if my brain didn't warn me away.

"I'm the only man I know who doesn't want her. I don't want her or her mother. The woman I want must want me. If you will take my advice, *mon ami*, and I pray you will, you will keep safe distances between you and that twisted bitch. I'd rather thrust my bare arm into a cage of the fer-de-lance of St. Martinique than touch her. She is poison. God knows how

many men she has ruined and discarded. She takes them from their wives, and when the family is irreparably smashed, she loses interest, or sees a stud with a harder cock. She takes money from them, but spends it so fast she and her mother are always in debt, always looking for new means for getting out of debt. Men have hanged themselves for her, or because of her. Black laborers from the fields and the highest and most decorated generals in Zaccone's armies. They're all one with her because she is incapable of love. She is in love with herself and perhaps in a way with her mother, as long as that remains convenient. She's too busy prowling, panning for gold, to fall in love. She would not allow it anyhow. Love would only get in her way. I am not bitter, but I am trying to warn you away from her. Let her get her tentacles in you, my friend, and it's all over."

Tommy spat the glob of hot acid that spewed up through his throat into his mouth. He kept his face averted. Masse would see the sickness in his cheeks, the guilt in his eyes. Anyhow, even if Masse were right about Jade, and God knew, he didn't doubt one word the big man said, or his generous motive in speaking, it was too late. It was, since last night, far too late. He was like the great black laborer, the rich merchant, or the government official: already enchanted, snared, enslaved by that beautiful and heartless little succubus. He knew Masse was telling the truth. Every word had the sad, sharp ring of truth, but it was too late. How could he stay away from her?

He did not say anything, and he kept his planter's hat lowered over his forehead so that Masse would not read the guilt and self-hatred in his eyes. Masse was a sensitive and intelligent man. One could not deceive him. He looked forward in anguish to that evil moment when Masse learned the truth. It would come, it was inevitable; he felt as if he were hurtling toward that crisis. It was as if all his life he had been running toward this moment of exposure, when a friend whose trust he needed saw him for what he was: a rutting boar, a dog with the scent, a whoremonger chasing after every scented and uptilted skirt he saw. A man not to be trusted because, damn it, he could not trust himself.

They came out of a thick, purple-green copse upon a high

ridge of the open road. Below them lay the sunstruck trail, open across a plain almost as far as they could see. Masse urged his horse forward at a gallop. Tommy jerked his head up to call out to Masse, but paused with his lips parted, his gaze fixed on something far down the sunlit trail.

Two people on horseback were down there, a woman on a palamino and a white-suited man on a roan. They were halted, crosswise in the roadway. The image was indelibly seared into Tommy's eyes. They were almost a mile away, and yet he was certain in the clear, sharp atmosphere which seemed to enlarge images anyhow, that the woman was Jade. His heart pounded because he would have bet his life he recognized the rider on the roan. It was Jean-Pierre Sardou. There was no doubt of it in Tommy's mind.

He jerked his gaze back, because this whole vision appeared in the space of a few seconds and Masse was moving away from him on the path. He called, "Masse, wait a minute."

Masse pulled up and glanced over his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"Look. There. Down the trail. Far down there. Two people. I'll swear Jade's riding a white horse—"

"She certainly owns one."

Tommy's voice rasped with urgency. "And the man with her. On the roan. Jean-Pierre Sardou. The son of a bitch I've been looking for. The goddamned slave trader."

Masse halted the horse and shaded his eyes, staring along the sun-blasted plain below them. Tommy pulled his own gaze around. His heart sank and sickness spread through him. The trail was empty, as far as they could see. If the man and woman had been down there, they'd disappeared like a mirage.

"God damn it, Masse," Tommy said, "they were there."

He rode alongside of Masse and the two of them moved on the hard-packed road together. "Don't worry about it. Sometimes the wish is father to the vision, eh?"

"Damn it, they were down there. In the trail. I saw them."

Masse smiled. "And yet in a few seconds they are gone. Disappeared. Next you'll be wearing the chicken feathers of Damballah, *mon ami*."

They rode in silence in through the damaged gates of

Plantation Jade Noir. They reined in at the ornate hitching post before the wide-columned veranda. Tommy felt sicker than ever. He had never witnessed a scene of more serene calm. Icres sat sprawled in his cane-back chair and Marie-Verlaine and her daughter, in crinolines, sat at a tea table. The table was spread with sweet cakes and petit fours and china tea setting.

He removed his hat and bowed to the people on the veranda. Aside, he said to Masse, "I'll take the horses to the stables and water and rub them down."

"You don't have to do that, my friend. We have stable boys."

"You forget. Noab is gone. He's the one who handled that chore."

Seeing that Tommy was adamant, Masse merely smiled and tossed him the reins. Tommy walked the two horses around the old house and across the shadow-dappled yard into the stables.

Inside the concrete building, he called to one of the boys sleeping in a haystack and told him to water the horses, wash them down and walk them a while before putting them in their stalls.

Once the boy had led the two horses out to the watering trough under a jacaranda tree, Tommy stalked along the stalls of the stable checking the horses. A few cribs from the front door, a magnificent white stallion pricked up its ears and whinnied at him, almost, he felt in his present mood, a kind of challenge. Speaking softly, reassuringly, Tommy reached out and caught the checkrein, pulling the animal to the cross-pieces. "Easy, boy," he whispered. "You tired? Been riding? Hmm? Fast?"

The horse was neither dry nor sweated. Obviously he had been washed and carefully rubbed down. Tommy cursed and released the rein. The horse retreated in the small crib, nostrils flaring.

"All right. All right," Tommy said. "No hard feelings."

He walked back across the yard. He was being poisoned by suspicion, torn apart by doubt and mistrust. Maybe Masse was right, maybe he had imagined seeing the riders, and even if he had glimpsed them before they rode away in the high

grass, there was no proof at all that Jade had been there, or that the man was the despised Jean-Pierre Sardou. Jesus knew, he just desperately wanted that to be true. It made everything so much easier.

He exhaled. Hell, he knew better. Nothing was easy, and certainly nothing in this conspiracy was simple. If it were, somebody would have solved the puzzle a long time ago. He didn't know whether Jade had been for an afternoon ride or not. All he did know was it was none of his business and he could not ask. Not unless he wanted to alienate Jade and her mother on nothing more substantial than a mirage that dissolved in the sun.

Masse stood in the rim of shade at the top of the wide steps when Tommy came along the walk and up to the shaded veranda. A cool breeze touched at Tommy's sun-braised face.

"Where are you going?" Tommy asked.

Masse shrugged. "To the stables. I've got to get a fresh horse."

"The white stallion looks fresh," Tommy said.

Jade laughed. "The white stallion is my horse. No one rides him but me. For I am a jealous goddess and will be avenged upon your children and your children's children."

Icres said in a weary voice from deep within his chair, "We had a messenger from Cap Francois. Hours ago. Masse will have to go into the department of Employment at the governor's palace in Cap Francois."

"Something about some papers we've got to sign,' Masse said. "Or we won't be able to get new laborers."

"The government is most upset," Marie-Verlaine said with a bright, teasing laugh. "We lose workers. We cannot account for them anymore. The government is most upset."

"Somebody is going to have to pay a lot of gourdes," Jade suggested. "If some palms high up in Don Zaccone's government are not well greased there may be trouble."

Icres sat forward in his chair. Though Jade and her mother laughed, he took the threat desperately seriously. He said to Masse, "You make whatever arrangements you must to keep it quiet and outside an inquiry. You understand, Masse? You can get a draft on my bank."

Masse shrugged. "As I said, I'll do the best I can, M'sieu Icres."

Icres lifted his hand, alarmed and apologetic. "I don't mistrust you, my dear friend. I don't mistrust you at all. You are one man I trust above all others. It is just that I am beside myself with dread, that's all. These government niggers could ruin me if they wanted to."

"Perhaps I should ride along with you," Tommy said to Masse. He said it to be helpful to the foreman, but as much to escape Jade and her arms until his emotions and suspicions were more in control. He could feel the girl's hungry, prowling gaze nibbling at him from across the shaded porch.

Masse shook his head. "No need. You don't need another twelve hours in the saddle after yesterday. It is just another bureaucratic problem. I'm used to handling them. I've gotten so I can handle these people with one bribing hand behind my back. . . ."

Marie-Verlaine poured a cup of tea for him and Tommy held it abstractedly, watching Masse ride along the driveway, through the scarred gate, and out of sight along the road to Cap Francois.

He set the cup on the table. "If you'll excuse me," he said, "I'll go take a shower. We had a long ride. For nothing."

"You found no trace of Noab in Carbe's mountain village?" Icres asked.

Tommy paused and looked over his shoulder. He drew a deep breath. "Those people knew nothing of Noab."

"Was Carbe there?" Marie-Verlaine asked in a chilled tone.

"No. He was not."

"Then you have settled nothing. Those followers of Damballah up there will never speak the truth to a stranger. It's more than a long-ingrained habit with them. Lying to outsiders is part of their religion."

Tommy sighed. "Noab wasn't up there," he said. "Masse said he believes the boy was never up there and that Carbe knows nothing of his disappearance."

Marie-Verlaine gave him an odd smile. "You are such a child in the ways of Haiti. Masse, too, must accept the truth if he hopes to survive."

Tommy spread his hands wide in a gesture of surrender and

gave each of them a tight, empty, and hypocritical smile. They were chatting again in polite and muted tones by the time he left the veranda. They seemed to have already forgotten him. He wished to God he could get them out of his muddled, teeming mind for just a few minutes. He had to think clearly, and yet this was impossible. They flew in the attic of his mind like wild creatures, like startled, colorful parakeets. Jade. Her mother. Icres. Masse. Carbe. Noab. And always the contorted, smiling face of that bastard Sardou. As long as they cluttered his brain he could think nothing.

He undressed and got under the cold shower, letting the chilled well water splash down on him for a long time. He leaned against the polished staves siding of the shower stall and put his head back yawning. Maybe he was just too tired to think. Maybe when his mind cleared . . .

He came out of the shower and, wrapped in a large cotton towel, went up the rear stairwell to the second floor. He left the shadowed, cavernous hallway and went into his bedroom. Thank God, the bed was freshly made. He yawned helplessly. He started across the room, then stopped, went back and locked the door. This should be a clear enough message for any visitor. He hoped to God it would be. He did not even want to talk to Jade, feeling as he did in this moment. And making love to her? Impossible.

He winced. If Jade came near him this afternoon, she would know at once something was terribly wrong. He did not doubt that she was likely the most aware, most sophisticated, analytical woman he had ever met. He didn't give a damn if she was only seventeen. Jade had been born knowing a thousand things most women never learn in a lifetime. She was not only covetous and greedy, she was smart and clever, instinctively knowing.

He fell across the mattress, yawning. He could not deal with Jade this afternoon.

He was drifting into sleep when he heard a creak, like aged boarding. He sat up on the bed in time to see a section of the paneled wall closing softly and unobtrusively, showing no break at all.

"Tommy. Oh, God, Tommy, how I've dreamed of you. How I've waited for you all day."

She came toward the bed, pulling at her clothing. He was already shaking his head. "Don't do this," he said. "Someone may come. We can't have them finding you here like this."

"Don't be a fool, darling, I came in through a hidden panel. I can go out the same way. You have nothing to fear, except your own timid conscience."

She threw aside her dress carelessly, kicked off her slippers and sat in sheerest underclothing on the bed beside him. She reached for him, boldly and unhesitatingly closing her hand on his flaccid member. "What's the matter?" she pouted. "Doesn't he want me?"

"He's tired," Tommy said, shaking his head. "Tired. And troubled."

"Troubled? About what?" She was no longer smiling. Her tea-rose face darkened, her slanted eyes glittering.

"About this. About Noab. About everything. I'm exhausted, Jade. You've just got to forgive me."

"I don't have to forgive you anything. If you're fool enough not to want me—"

"Listen to me, Jade. The man hasn't been born with testes who doesn't want you. Of course I want you."

"Then I think you should act like it."

Tommy tried to smile. He kissed her cool, moist full lips, at first gently. His hand cupped over her high-standing breasts. He bent his head down, and taking the pink nipple in his mouth, suckled hotly until she moaned and whimpered, crying out his name, her hips already undulating.

When she reached down and touched him and found him soft and lax, she lunged up from the bed, her hair wild about her face, cursing.

"It's Masse, isn't it?" she said, rasping.

"What's Masse got to do with it? I'm tired. Give me—"

"I give you nothing. Men take from me, or they get nothing. Or maybe they are not men at all. Is that what's the matter? Are you another whey man like old Icres down there in his chair—"

"Jade. Listen to me." He reached out and caught her arms. "You're going to bring the house down on us."

"I don't give a damn. Do you hear me? If you do not want me, you can go to hell. If you have let that lyin' nigger Masse

turn you against me, you can go to hell. . . . That's it, isn't it? You've been listening to Masse. Masse and his lies. What has Masse said to you to make you hate me?"

"Jesus Christ. I don't hate you."

She nodded, her face taut and pallid. Her eyes glistened like green brass in brilliant light. "I know the truth. It is Masse. Masse has turned you against me."

He got up, his exhaustion forgotten. He reached for her, closing his hands on her arms, but she wrenched free, spitting at him like a roused cat. She ran across the room. She left her dress, shoes, and underthings thrown wildly around his bed. The panel slid open and Jade slithered through it. The secret door closed before he got to it. He could find no way to open it.

Tommy stumbled back across the room. He sprawled out on his back across the bed, but he could not sleep. Hell, he might never sleep again.

When the brass bells tinkled announcing dinner, Tommy was dressed. He gathered up Jade's things and put them under a pillow on his bed. Then he hurried along the upper hallway and down the wide steps.

Except for the servants he was the first one in the formal dining room. A meal of roasted hen, garden vegetables, and avocado salad was set and waiting at each place. The servants lined the wall beside the kitchen door. They stared straight ahead and tried not to be slumping when Marie-Verlaine entered the room, suddenly and unexpectedly.

Tommy stood beside his chair. He stood there for a long time before Marie-Verlaine and her daughter entered the room and, with servants holding their chairs for them, sat down across the table from him. Marie-Verlaine gave him a cool smile and the briefest nod. Jade beside her, was stark faced, seething inside but like ceramic glaze outside. Her green eyes were red and swollen. She had been crying, but she was crying no more. The way her face was set, she looked as if she might never cry again for anybody. Whatever was ahead for her, she was prepared for it, and Tommy didn't have to be extraordinarily sensitive to realize there was no place for him in Jade's future. She did not look at him, but stared directly ahead.

Tommy went on standing there. Icres shambled in after a long wait, leaning heavily upon a malacca cane. He sat down and nodded his head, gesturing for Tommy to be seated. Icres said, "I'm afraid we have some very bad news. We are most worried about Masse."

Tommy felt his heart constrict. "Masse?" he repeated numbly. "What about Masse?"

"We are most upset. There has been no word of Masse since he left here this afternoon to go to Cap Francois," Icres said.

"I'm sure we'll hear," Tommy said. "It is a long ride into town. He has urgent business with bureaucrats. A long ride back. It may be quite late when he gets back."

"No." Icres shook his head. "You don't understand, M'sieu Lavedon. Our message came from Cap Francois. From the Department of Employment. Quite angry. Quite annoyed. Masse never reached the governor's palace. The authorities are afraid that he has disappeared."

Tommy sat tautly, unmoving, afraid he was going to be ill. For some reason he could not explain even to himself, except as an insane reaction, he wanted to grab those two beautiful women across the table by the throats and squeeze until he pressed the truth out of them. It did no good to remind himself that the women had not left Jade Noir since he'd returned. Jade had been a raging virago in his bedroom. A perfect alibi.

He bit down hard on his jaw and said nothing. He pushed his food about his plate, but ate nothing. If he ate now, he would vomit. All of it, the whole hellish day, the mountain village, the roasting pit, the dwarf's skewered body, Jade's petulant screaming, Noab's disappearance and now Masse's vanishing: it was too much. And he could not escape the thought screeching and wailing inside his brain: Those two women across this table—they were as guilty as if they had committed the crimes in person. It did not matter that they sat sipping tea on the veranda, they were guilty. They didn't have to be at the scene of the crime. Hell, they were both of them born guilty.

The hours passed slowly. Jade wandered the veranda and strolled aimlessly in the dark garden. Marie-Verlaine and

Icres played chess, quietly and intensely. But all of them appeared preoccupied, as if listening for Masse's horse on the driveway. They listened, even when they knew it was never going to happen.

Tommy prowled the lower part of the house. He and Jade avoided each other, averted their faces when they did meet. What had Marie-Verlaine predicted? Omens of evil, terrible things would happen, and soon. Well, they were deluged with evil in this balmy, starlit night.

He said good night. Icres and Marie-Verlaine mumbled something, barely looking up from the chessboard. Tommy climbed the stairs wearily. The backs of his legs felt too weak to support him.

He went into his bedroom and locked the door behind him. He smiled grimly. At least he no longer had to lock his door against the beautiful and wanton Jade. Whatever they had had and might have had, it was over and gone. Her hatred for him was almost tangible between them, like something to cut with a knife.

To his surprise, Jade's belongings—her dress, shoes, underthings—were gone from beneath his pillow. Damn her! How she got around. She moved like a cat inside these walls.

He went across the room to the secret panel. He ran his fingers along the beveled framing. Suddenly his finger bumped a wooden switch and the panel eased open, whispering like rats in a wall.

He stepped through into the passageway. It was narrow, the studding of the upper rooms visible. Everything was covered with dust. It was even more remarkable that Jade passed through here and never soiled her fingers or marked her dress or shoes. Like a cat.

He inched, sidling along the passage until he found the area where he was certain Jade slept. There was no need for conjecture. He could smell her colognes and powders, and the sweet scent of her body. His heart sank and pounded oddly. He found a panel, and located the switch that operated it.

When the panel swung open, Tommy stepped out into the sweet-smelling, aromatic room, a place of dozens of dresses, hundreds of pairs of shoes, full-length mirrors strategically placed so Jade could view herself from every angle and at her leisure.

Jade stood up from a wing-back chair in the shadows near the balcony. She faced him across the room, her pallid face rigid, her green eyes chilled. "What do you want in here?"

"I want to talk to you."

"Don't you know that if I scream, I can have you shot?"

"I hope you won't."

"Then you get out of here. Never come near me again."

"There is something I must ask you, Jade. Something I must know. And I think you can answer it. Where is Masse? What has happened to him?"

She looked as if she might scream like a banshee, wail out her rage or run at him, clawing. But she did nothing. Gradually the fury swirling in her green eyes subsided and she peered at him coolly. "I was right. Of course I was. Masse has turned you against me. His nigger lies convinced you I was evil and he a saint."

"I only want to know were he is. That's all. It need not go beyond this room. Tell me where he is, Jade, and I'll get out of here."

"Are you so sure then that I know?"

"Tell me where he is, Jade. I want to help him if I can."

She laughed. "You want to help him. Is that some stupid appeal to my compassion?"

"I know better, Jade. It's just that if you'll tell me where they've taken Masse—"

"Why should I?" She walked languidly toward him, shedding garments with a lithe twisting of her body as she moved. "What will you do for me? What sort of trade do you offer?"

"This." He reached out and caught her in his arms. By this time she stood nude, statuesque, before him. His mind whirled with every conflicting emotion known to man. He hated himself. He hated Jade. He hated Masse. He hated the god who made women like her, and weak, spineless men like him.

"Will you kiss me?" she whispered. "Will you take me in your arms? Will you caress my breasts and touch me all over and fuck me? Will you fuck me, Tommy? Will you? Say it. Say it. Say it."

She crushed her mouth against his. She clutched the back of his head in her hands and held him fiercely against her naked body. He felt her long nails rake downward across the

nape of his neck and then, abruptly, he felt nothing else. At first Jade drifted away, though she did not move at all. She stared at him from some interminable distance and he reached out for her, but her body was like smoke. He closed his hands on emptiness. His eyes grew heavy and hot. His legs felt as if they were paralyzed, and then he had no feeling in them at all. Then he was falling, slowly, in terrible, unending slowness, but by the time he struck the floor, he felt nothing at all and the world was black around him. He could not move.

XXIX

In the eye of the hurricane there is a zone of dead stillness. This was where Tommy lay, as helpless as an overturned beetle, on the floor of Jade's scented bedroom. He tried to stir, but could not. His arms and legs were rigid. He was totally paralyzed. He could not even move his head from side to side and his eyes seemed set in their sockets. He could hear sounds, but only vaguely, as if from a great distance and over the roaring of surf on the beach. He knew he was nowhere near the beach. He knew where he was, all right. He was in Jade's private purgatory, helpless against her. Hell, he'd always been helpless against her. That was one reason why he was caught like this now.

He tried desperately to alter his gaze, to find Jade, that lovely goddess of death in her own personal Abaddon. But he could see only the ceiling of the room, and vague shadows as Jade moved about. The cloying scent of her perfumes and dresses and toiletries assailed his senses. He could not see what she was doing, but from the shadows that flared across his eyes he knew she was busy, in a frantic way.

After a long time she stood above him, wearing a plain housedress, her hair covered in a black bandanna. She wore no makeup; her face was severely plain and untouched. She stared down at him for what seemed a long time and then with a contemptuous twist of her full lips, she reached down and pressed his eyelids closed.

Using every ounce of willpower, Tommy struggled vainly. He could not open his eyes, and now he was in a realm of darkness unbroken by anything except vague sounds.

From some incredible distance he heard a door discreetly opened and softly closed. There was a strange prolonged silence and then disembodied voices that he recognized as Marie-Verlaine's and her daughter's.

"Is he dead?"

"Near enough." Jade's voice was totally uncaring and disinterested.

"Wouldn't it be easier simply to kill him?"

"What harm can a zombi do you?"

"I don't trust anything, Jade. In heaven or on earth. Something can always go wrong."

"Not if we act swiftly, Mother. Not if we are clever. And how clever must we be to deceive the capon Icres? How much energy has it required of you all these years?"

"We cannot have people continually asking questions. Questions have a most embarrassing way of adding up, Jade. You had better learn that."

"I know all about questions. All about answers." She laughed, a bitter sound. "I was born knowing, and what I didn't already know, I learned suckling at your tits."

There was a long silence and then Marie-Verlaine said, "We are taking a big, unnecessary risk allowing him to live, even as a zombi."

"He won't be around here. I told you, we can't kill him. We'd have to dispose of the body. And I promised Sardou . . ." She kicked Tommy in the kidney with the point of her shoe. "Sardou wants him desperately, apparently. And that's fine with me."

"Does Sardou know we're burying him?" Jade said something in reply to her mother's questions, something intense and bitter, but unintelligible in Tommy's demiworld. The next words he understood, after what seemed an eternal silence, was Marie-Verlaine's voice. "It will be up to Sardou to open his grave before he finally suffocates."

Tommy lay as if in some terminal trance, helpless, wrapped in shrouds of silence. He tried to open his eyes and could not. He tried to move his arms, his hand, even his little finger, but it was futile and impossible. He was totally incapacitated. He supposed to a casual onlooker it would appear that he was dead, calm, serene, the victim of natural causes. A scream of

anguish worked its way up to his throat and was clogged there.

In this darkness everything was so crystal clear. When it was too late he finally realized the truth about Jade and Sardou and Jade's mother and the terrible conspiracy they perpetrated against the helpless Icres, and against Masse and, most of all, against Tommy Verder himself. Tommy Verder. The zombi. Was this moment, the climax of his strange life that his private Furies had been racing him toward?

God, how simple the whole thing was, now that it was too late. How clearly he read the images before his eyes. He *had* seen Jade out on that trail talking to Sardou this afternoon. They had simply ridden off the road into the tall grasses of the plain and disappeared. No magic was involved once you saw how it was done. It was like understanding the sleight of hand of the magician: he no longer seemed so amazing.

He would have sweated, but not even his sweat glands worked anymore. This was total death, or the jagged edge of it.

He struggled deep inside himself, trying to force his body to respond. He had seen Jade talking with Sardou. There must have been many topics on their agenda, in hell's name: the latest delivery of blacks, including the youth Noab, for Sardou's slave trade, blacks shackled in the hidden corral, wherever the hell that was. And Jade had known by then that Masse would be traveling alone that afternoon, on his way to a rendezvous in Cap Francois that he must never be allowed to keep. She had passed that information to Sardou as well. And as an extra fillip, they had arranged to pass Tommy Verder, zombi, along to the plotting of Sardou. Taking the bag of gold was not enough—Sardou still had other plans for his former "partner." That bastard. That unholy bastard.

Tommy wanted to rage in laughter at the simplicity of Marie-Verlaine's plot for untold wealth in the slave trade. Somehow there was no laughter, even if the message center in his brain was still operative, which it was not. The icing on the cake, the thing that made Marie-Verlaine's plan so perfect, was Carbe. As long as all suspicion centered on that old man, no one asked too many questions of Marie-Verlaine. And as that lovely *mere savanne* herself admitted, questions were what she feared the most. Too many questions added

up. As long as she kept Icres and the authorities asking questions about Carbe, she could move easily and unfettered. It was only when Masse and Tommy got too inquisitive that she was forced to strike inside the old plantation house itself.

She could not be too at ease, and yet, she was one hell of a lot better off than Tommy Verder, sprawled on his back, unable to wink an eyelid. If all went well for her and Jade, tomorrow would be another bright, warm, and uneventful day at Plantation Jade Noir.

Jade's and her mother's voices died out in the cloying sweet silence of Jade's bedroom. For Tommy it was an eternity of silence, a sickening, gut-wrenching prelude to death. Hell, this was what death had to be. Eternal silence. A deafening and terrifying cosmic silence, a sense of floating disembodied in blackness, straining to hear a sound, even one clatter of a dropped pin, a broken voice shard, a mouse in the wall. Anything. But there was only silence, and he sank deeper and deeper into it, as if into some smothering green mire that encased and smothered him, even when the mire itself was silent and without substance.

The tall Swiss clock in the foyer struck twelve unrelated times. Tommy felt himself lifted by two shirtless blacks and placed on a canvas stretcher. Tommy wanted to weep aloud with the sudden clarity of the means Marie-Verlaine used to accomplish her kidnappings. Those blacks at Icres's farm who never vanished were those employed and protected by the priestess herself. Neither Jade nor Marie-Verlaine ever had to be at any scene of any crime unless they somehow perversely desired it. He wanted to cry out but sounds surged into his throat and died there. He wanted to lash out, but his arms and legs and lips and eyelids remained fast, immobile.

Tommy could not see who was around him or where they bore him on the stretcher. Somehow he knew Marie-Verlaine and Jade walked behind the stretcher-bearers. It was well after midnight and Icres was safely abed and asleep. Some perversity in the two women impelled them to accompany this ghoulish parade in the night. They went down the staircase, moving silently, as if barefoot. A heavy front door closed behind them and then he was borne across the veranda and into the blackest night.

He knew their silent trek in the blackness of the tropical night was illumined by fire torches in the hands of other blacks. He had no idea how many were in this procession, but he had read that many voodoo burials had all the pomp and color of a Freemason funeral. Maybe he was getting that kind of send-off in this after-midnight ceremony.

He could not, of course, *see* the torches or the mourners, but he could feel the heat of the wood-knot fires against his eyelids, and he could sense the rest. It was easier for the five senses to react keenly because his body was totally immobilized. He could not see because he was unable to open his eyelids, but his hearing seemed intensified. He could even hear the sound bare feet made on the shell path, and on the pine needles and leaves when they left it.

It may have been ten minutes, or ten years, Tommy would never know, that he was borne along on that stretcher through the torchlighted night. He had no sense of chronological time in this emptiness where he sailed, disembodied.

Whatever time it was, minutes or hours, he was aware at last that the procession stopped. He was placed on the ground upon the stretcher. Then for what seemed a curious and disconnected shattering against his eardrums, he was conscious that men were digging with spades and piling dirt in a wet, clotted pile beside his stretcher. Jesus God, they were excavating a hole for his grave.

Finally the sounds of spades thrust into unyielding sod ceased. Tommy felt his body being lifted from the stretcher and placed in a six-foot pine casket which crushed against his shoulders and biceps. Then a lid was placed on the bier. It was no darker than outside in the night, just closer.

The pinewood coffin was lifted carelessly at each end as long ropes were laced under it. Then it was dropped, lifted, swung upward, and then lowered into the rude grave.

Tommy felt himself suffocating. God knew, these people didn't have to violently murder their victims. They could immobilize them as Jade had done and then let them suffocate in a grave.

Deep inside him, he was screaming in protest. But as in nightmares, he was helpless to make a sound or to move his limbs. He could not imagine a more horrible death than suffocation.

He heard the first shovelful of earth thrown into the grave and thud onto the coffin lid. He did not hear the second. He plunged into blackness more blinding, and a vacuum more fearsome, than he had ever dreamed in his wildest nightmare. And then, he remembered nothing more. . . .

Tommy came awake slowly.

He felt as if he were in some deep pit of slime and had to fight his way upward through it before his aching lungs imploded. He tried to hurry his way, but there was a terrible slowness in everything that happened. He was aware first that his lungs and chest were working like bellows and he was gasping for breath, and that the air was pure and sweet and life-restoring.

Gradually he became aware that it was daylight. What day, month, or eon, he had no inkling. Whether he was on earth or in heaven or upon some midstation, he had no idea. He did not care. He kept gasping for breath, drawing the sweet, pure oxygen into his lungs.

"Take care," a gentle voice admonished. "You'll be ill."

Tommy struggled with all his strength and managed to open his eyelids. This was like the major accomplishment of mankind. He wanted to cry out in his delight.

He recognized the thin, parchment face bowed close over his.

"Carbe," he whispered. His throat ached, still partially paralyzed, but he could make sounds.

Carbe's gentle eyes smiled, reassuring him. Maybe this was what it was like when one saw God. A kindly face. Gentle eyes. Forgiving. Without judging, and smiling, as one smiles at a newborn baby.

Carbe worked over him, moving methodically, but with haste for one as old as Carbe, whatever age that was. As Carbe worked, he spoke in a soft tone. "I became worried when I heard that M'sieu Masse, the good man of the Plantation Jade Noir, had disappeared. I knew it to be the evil actions of the priestess of Obi, with her Petro magic. Or her pretense. There was no magic. Masse had learned the truth. I long ago warned him against her and her daughter, as I warned you. When I heard he had vanished, I knew that he

had come too close to Marie-Verlaine's secret. She had to get rid of him, and this meant that you might well be next."

Carbe continued to work. "As my life is of no value, my time of no worth, and I spend the days wandering the island, I stayed close in the garden at Plantation Jade Noir and watched. The procession. The burial . . . I had to wait until the hour before dawn so I could be certain it was safe to have my brothers remove you from the grave and carry you to this village."

"How did this happen? How was I paralyzed?"

"Easily. You were poisoned, my son, by a poison three hundred times deadlier than cyanide."

"But I wasn't injected with anything. I didn't drink anything. I was standing there and suddenly slumped to the floor, paralyzed."

"Were you not touched by the mother or the daughter?"

Tommy felt fevered with the agonizing recall. Jade had touched him, all right. She had clutched his head with her hands and drawn her long nails down the nape of his neck, piercing the flesh.

"I was injected, all right," he admitted.

"It takes very little to render one helpless, paralyzed."

"The amount held on the tip of a fingernail," Tommy said.

"I must tell you that the amount of this zombi potion picked up on the head of a pin is fatal."

"This was very well planned."

"Everything the priestess does is well planned. And her daughter may be more evil, more satanic even than the mother. . . . I can tell you that the zombi powder used by all sects, all priests and priestesses, is the same, made from dried puffer fish and pulverized human bones."

Tommy shuddered involuntarily, feeling the hackles stand across the back of his neck.

"Zombi powder is seldom used to kill. Death by a poison three hundred times deadlier than cyanide is no rite at all. Usually, the potion is prepared and administered by sorceresses and sorcerers to punish people for crimes or transgressions against their secret codes, or when formal law fails to provide justice.

"Like you, the victim appears to die. He even looks as if

he has died a natural death, and no present-day autopsy can reveal the zombi powder. The dose administered is too miniscule for that.

"The priest has only to rub the trace of zombi powder against an open wound or the smallest cut in the victim's flesh. The potion enters the bloodstream, puts him into a deathlike state. He cannot speak, or move, but usually can hear and think disjointedly."

Carbe went on working over Tommy's prone body on the table in the dirt-floored hut. He continued to speak, because it was obvious he believed that if Tommy understood the business of the voodoo zombi potion, he could deal better with it, recover more quickly.

"The victim is assumed dead by the villagers and the authorities and his family. He is buried alive, but later retrieved by the priest's helpers from the grave.

"The zombi is never fully restored to life. But he is often revived with beatings and strong doses of another drug extracted from a plant known here in Haiti as the zombi cucumber. He is brought back only to a kind of half-life, neither truly alive nor actually dead. These are the walking dead, the zombis who pay through life for their crimes.

"I was certain we could save your life if we were not forced to wait too long before we recovered you from the grave. A victim must be dug up within six to twelve hours after burial or the limited supply of oxygen in the earth-covered coffin would run out and he would suffocate and truly die. But death is not what is wanted for the criminal turned zombi.

"The zombi cucumber induces hallucinations and terrible mental states, so the victim can be easily placed in a stunned, slavelike existence. He exists in a troubled trance.

"I can assure you, my dear son, that you will have no problems when we have restored you to health. No zombi would ever remain in that trancelike state if he were not constantly reinjected with the powder. From time to time the zombi's food may be laced with zombi powder to keep him docile. In Haiti, zombification is akin to capital punishment. If the elected officials fail, the secret societies outside government often mete out justice according to their voodoo religion."

* * *

After a long time, his stomach purged, Tommy was able to close his hand at his side, move his arms and legs on the table. "In three or four days," Carbe said, "you should feel well enough to walk again."

"No." Tommy struggled to sit up. Carbe jerked his head, ordering his helpers to restrain the man on the table. "You have saved my life, venerable. I knew when I first saw you that you were a Christ-like man. The kind of man Christ really must have been, and not the namby-pamby of legend and Christian myth. But I don't have three days. I have no time at all. Sardou may sail. He may already have sailed. If you can give me something—anything that will strengthen me, please do, but strong or weak, I must get out of here. I must find Sardou before he gets away."

Carbe's gentle old face paled. "You need time. You have been in hell. A man does not recover quickly."

"I don't have to recover, Carbe. I just have to move, to be able to move. You were absolutely right. Masse did find out about the slave trading that Marie-Verlaine was involved in. She did have to get rid of him. She believed she had to get rid of both of us, and she's done a pretty damned good job of it. But Masse was looking for a corral in the forest where black workers were left shackled for Sardou to collect them like animals. I've got to find that place, Carbe. I've got to find Sardou."

Carbe was silent for a long time and then, at last, he slowly nodded his gray head. He went across the room and worked over a bowl for a long time. He returned at last with a concoction the color of new-let blood, with shards of what appeared to be green goat's cheese and herbs floating in it. At the smell of it, Tommy nearly vomited.

"Drink this," Carbe said. "Hold your breath and drink it. Do not ask me what it is. Drink. It will never replace three or four days total rest, but it may restore some of your strength."

Tommy held the bowl as far from him as possible, drew and held a deep breath. He brought the vessel to his mouth and drank deeply, gulping it down to the last filthy drop. He let the bowl fall from his fingers and clasped his hand tightly over his mouth to keep from vomiting.

Carbe had all this time been drawing with charcoal on a rumpled sheet of wrapping paper. "Masse's mistake," he

said, "was to search the forest. They were much cleverer . . . I can help you this much, and no more, my dear young friend." He placed the crude map in Tommy's fist. "May your god go with you."

Tommy winced. This was the worst thing Carbe could possibly wish upon him. His gods, the drunken bastards, had brought him here. . . .

XXX

Tommy was far down the road from Carbe's village before the effects of the drugs and antidotes even began to wear off. He walked unsteadily, shambling along in the heat, but moving toward the water.

Long before he reached the old house on the bluff overlooking a hidden bay, Tommy became aware that he was being followed. Who could care what a half-dead man, recovered from zombi powder and being buried alive, was doing out in this relentless tropical sun?

He gradually was able to stride without stumbling. There was a man behind him, all right. A man who moved when he did, stopped when he did. He thought sickly that he knew it was not Hobart Cobb. He bit back the bile even when he thought of the ugly little dwarf, his head flopping loosely on that spit.

He kept walking, following the road, the trail, and then the path as marked on Carbe's map. To his astonishment, he came suddenly out of the lush hammock onto a high bluff overlooking the crystal-green waters of the bay far below. This was the place marked by Carbe's rough *X*.

The fieldstone fences enclosing the estate had been destroyed in the frenzy of slaying and destruction a quarter of a century ago. Every white, and every vestige of property owned by whites, had to be defiled, desecrated, destroyed, or the black man of Haiti could never live again in dignity. Well, he had his dignity now, and his ruins.

Tommy did not glance over his shoulder or even betray any suspicion that he was being stalked. He moved slightly faster,

growing dizzy with the exertion. He stepped quickly behind a shattered stone pillar that may once have been a stone support of somebody's stables. The pillar was all that remained, and it was covered with vines.

Tommy pressed his back against the stone pillar and waited. He heard the uncertain footsteps approaching, and then the black man walked past him, stopping abruptly, sickly sensing Tommy's presence when it might be too late.

Tommy did not hesitate. Summoning all the strength inside him, every tattered fabric and even the memory of power, he stepped forward and chopped his unknown pursuer across the back of his neck.

The breath burst across Tommy's lips with the exertion. The blow should have brought the man to his knees, but the black man absorbed the punch more as a pat. He staggered just slightly, but kept his balance.

The black man swung around. He held a handgun ready in his fist. Tommy thrust out his left hand as if he meant to grab at the gun. When the fellow jerked it upward, he was for the moment vulnerable, and Tommy kicked him in the crotch. The man gagged, but recovered even from this assault. When he would not fall, Tommy kicked him in the groin again, this time with all the power he could summon in his shattered corpus.

The man submitted to the pain then. He dropped the handgun to the hard-packed ground and sank to his knees, almost as if in prayer. He crouched there, his face contorted, full lips stretched taut away from large white teeth. He hugged his arms across the stunning pain in his loins, and his eyes filled with liquid agony.

Tommy reached down and confiscated the man's handgun.

When the man whimpered faintly in agony he could not bite back, Tommy said, "Sorry. Never learned to fight fair, old partner. I hate to fight and I do it only to stay alive."

The man mumbled something unintelligible and toppled over on his side. He lay in this fetal position, trying to draw his legs up inside him somehow, to ease the pain in his scrotum and lower belly.

Using the man's shirt, Tommy tied him up: ankles and wrists behind his back and a taut line from ankles to wrists to

help keep him off balance. "I'd run it around your throat, old-timer, but you don't have enough shirt."

The man cursed him volubly for some taut seconds without once repeating himself. "The certain indication of a misspent life," Tommy told him. "I myself grew up on those words."

The trussed-up man cursed him again. "Feeling better, eh?" Tommy inquired. "Maybe you're ready to talk now. Who are you? One of Sardou's hired guards?"

The man lay silent for some time. At last, as if he had resolved something within his own mind, he said in a flat tone still tinged with agony and hatred, "I followed you from the old man's village. I was looking for you for days. Ever since I arrived by ship."

"Arrived? Somebody sent you? Who are you? What the hell do you want?" When the fellow didn't answer quickly enough to please him, Tommy pressed the snout of the handgun up his left nostril.

He only had to jab with the gun once. The man said, "My name is Caymen. Ira Caymen."

"I never heard of you, Caymen. Why are you after me?" Tommy knelt beside him in the sun, peering into his pallid face.

"I was hired to kill you," Caymen said at last. "I am a private detective. I work for white people, mostly among the blacks and freed men of color in New Orleans."

"Who hired you, Caymen? Anyone I know?"

Caymen exhaled heavily. "I was hired by a genteel white lady. A society matron from up on St. Charles Avenue."

Obviously, the fact that he had been chosen to do the bidding of the elite, the very cream of Crescent City society, was a source of great pride to Ira Caymen.

"She must have a name," Tommy suggested.

"It's privileged information," Caymen said.

"Not with this gun up your nose it isn't," Tommy said. "Get this over with. I'm running out of time as well as patience."

"I was—to kill you. But simply to shoot you from a distance was not enough. I was to deliver you a message first—"

"From?" Tommy pushed on the gun.

Caymen cried out in reaction to the sudden pain. "From

Mrs. Gale Michel Vigneaux. I was to tell you before you died that Mrs. Vigneaux had hired me and sent me down here to kill you because you had made her and her most genteel and wealthy and respected husband, a Monsieur Francois Vigneaux, you had made both of them the laughingstocks of upper-class New Orleans. This was an evil she could not endure and allow you to live."

Tommy sat for some moments on his haunches, remembering Gale and St. Charles Avenue and the genteel Francois Vigneaux masked in an alley like some thug. It was almost nostalgic. Almost like looking back to the good old days. Only not quite . . .

Tommy used the leftover tatters of Ira Caymen's shirt to tie a gag in the detective's mouth. He bent down over him, still pushing on that gun in the black man's nostril. "You make any noise if anyone shows up here, and I promise you one thing—you'll never live to get back to report to your elegant client. I'll kill you before anyone can get to us."

Tommy left Ira Caymen propped against the pillar. He figured that even if the black detective was spotted, he would be seen as another slave deposited in the wrong place. The deep anguished moans from the shattered hulk of the old mansion told him where the other prisoners were shackled and chained to the standing stone walls.

The very vestiges of the destroyed mansion demonstrated how magnificent it had once been, like a bright tiara set on the brow of this high tor overlooking the hidden bay far below. The revolutionists, like frenzied sharks, had left no more of this once sprawling villa than a few jagged stone outerwalls which enclosed the demolished interior. It was this ruined inner space and the remains of the walls that Marie-Verlaine's people used as the corral where blacks were herded like animals on their first leg of the long voyage into slavery.

God in heaven. This was the corral Masse had so futilely sought all these months. Again, Tommy was stunned at the open simplicity of the plan—a ruined mansion—destroyed, abandoned, and discarded on a lonely hill. Who would look in such a place for herds of black animals? Again, Masse had overestimated Marie-Verlaine's cleverness. Or maybe a simple plan was the most clever of all the hardest to decipher.

Tommy listened for a long time for the sound of approaching horsemen. When he heard nothing, he gambled and walked around the outer perimeter of the men chained to the broken stone walls. He recognized none of them. He saw that neither Noab nor Masse was among these poor wretches. This didn't reassure him or improve his soured temper.

The abandoned gardens of this old showplace had been allowed to return to weeds and wildflowers. The hedge growth was thick and lush and provided him a perfect hiding place.

He stuffed Ira's gun under his belt and put his back against the bole of an avocado tree, concealed from four sides by the tree and the lush growth of the forgotten hedge plants.

At first, overcome with weariness, he wanted to sleep, and then, remembering Sardou, he realized that sleeping, or anything less than total wariness, might prove fatal. He forced his eyes open, kept flexing his fingers and moving his arms, telling himself that strength was returning to his body. Jesus, he was a born liar. . . .

Sardou's men arrived suddenly, coming up over the lip of the bluff from the bay far downhill.

Holding his breath, Tommy sat forward on his knees, watching the slavers. They were black men and white; they had the look of laborers, the look of the long-salted seaman. They rode in swiftly and without bothering to look around, so complacent had they become in this trade which the administration of Don Juan Zaccone the Beloved announced to the world was an illegal act, a crime against the State, punishable by death. Zaccone averred that slave trading would not be tolerated in Haiti or Haitian waters. He was right; it was not tolerated: with the right payment, it was encouraged.

The gang worked swiftly, expertly. They entered the ruined mansion and freed the men from their chains. They marched them outside and lined them up in two rows. The poor blacks cowered, terrorized. Some of the younger ones wept openly. A few of the older men cried, too. They were at a place now where it didn't matter if they were manly; they could cry for all they'd lost, for the slavery that lay ahead of them.

In less than ten minutes, the prisoners were ready for the quickstep march downhill to the bay.

Tommy forced himself to wait two minutes after the last horseman was off the bluff. There was no chance that he

would lose their trail now. His heart slugged faster when he thought about finding Sardou in that house by the bay.

He walked all the way to the rim of the bluff. From where he stood in the sunlight, he could see the two rows of black men quickstepping downhill, the horsemen herding them along.

He found the old house and docks beside the bay. The place was almost concealed by growths of great ironwoods and mahogany trees.

Forgetting his weakness and concentrating on the savagery of the hatred simmering in his gut, Tommy strode across the clearing. He untied Ira's legs and told him to walk ahead of him. He saw that Ira's eyes too were frantic with hatred. He knew better than to trust a hysterical man, even a bound and gagged one. He would not let Gale Vigneaux's emissary spoil this meeting with his former partner in that house down there. He jabbed Ira's one pistol into Ira's kidney.

He growled with the ironic memory that the house down there was the farm Sardou had begged him to invest in with him. "Come on, Ira," he said, "let's go. I promise you . . . you delay me, or foul me up, it'll be your last instant on this earth. I don't like Gale Vigneaux and I don't like anybody who works for her. You might keep that in mind."

Tommy stood, pistol jammed into Ira's side, at the rim of the clearing of the villa beside the bay. The house had been plundered in the revolution but was still livable. One could see all the old signs of pillage and massacre one found at most of the great showplaces of French Haiti: the mindless damage wrought by rampaging blacks driven insane by the yoke of imperialism and enslavement. He stood at the edge of a dark stream that raced its torturous way through clotted bamboos, bays, elders, past the sprawled remains of smaller buildings to spill into the bay out beside the long wooden piers. Everything was being reclaimed by the jungle. He gazed at Sardou's headquarters, what once had been a plantation manor house.

He secured Ira to a bay tree. Below them the black men were being loaded into whale boats at the docks and rowed out to the rusty brigantine lying at anchor in the bay. He waited until the last of the whaleboats were in the water, then

he looked around for the most concealed approach to the old house.

It was then that he saw Jade's white horse tied at an ancient hitching post remaining from the glory days. His heart sank. He had no idea why Jade was here, only that it forebade no good for him. Still, it could not stop him, either. Maybe she had come to warn Sardou Tommy had been removed from his grave, maybe only to collect payment for her slaves.

Tommy crept stealthily up the steps of the old house, reluctant but determined. Fire had gutted a hole in the veranda flooring the size of a gaming table. Planks had been thrown across the charred, gaping hole and tendrils of vines poked timid fingers along the burnt edges and around the careless boarding. Tommy stepped cautiously around this pit. Much of the slanted cypress roofing was burned away. The large front doorway gaped open, the screen and the inner thick magnolia wood facing long since ripped away in vandal passion or someone's need for handy firewood. Lamps burned inside the house and all through the structure; scarred walls stood as mute testament of the impassioned flames which had eaten but not devoured the ancient villa. Staring through the windows, Tommy saw that most usable furniture had been removed, stolen, sold, or burned. No doors or windows remained intact anywhere. Through the passageways the ammoniac stench of urine boiled on the night wind. But Sardou obviously did not care about this. This place was his gold mine. The way station on the trail of the slave traders.

He saw Sardou and Jade standing inside the parlor of the old house. They seemed silent, awaiting something. Moths the size of humming birds flew mindlessly into the smoky chimneys of the lanterns set on crates in the middle of the room. Faint light licked at the shadows on the stairs to nowhere, steps missing like teeth in a savagely smiling mouth. The failing light lost itself in the dark obscurity of the cavernous mansion. Mosquitoes swarmed up from the growth along the bay.

Tommy sidled close to the jamb of the outer door. He could hear the voices of the men at the dock, the cry of birds in the jungle. Only from within Sardou's house, where Jean-Pierre and Jade stood, was there silence.

Taking a deep breath, holding it, his rib cage aching, Tommy stepped out into the doorway, his gun leveled on the two people inside the room.

Sardou and Jade turned slowly, gazing at him quite calmly. Sardou even managed a faint, taunting smile, his left brow tilted.

"Come on in," Sardou said. "We've been waiting for you."

XXXI

Tommy stepped to the right of the opened doorway and put his back to the wall. He was aware of the fading sunlight, the way even the sea breezes seemed to have paused, as if the world held its breath with him.

"It's been a long time," Sardou said, "but now we are here. It has all worked out all right."

"Has it?" Tommy thought he answered Sardou immediately and sharply, but something else had happened in this strange place. Everything had been rushing, like a thunderous stream toward a falls, as if hastening him to this place and this moment. Suddenly the pace changed, as if coming to a screeching halt and then moving again in exaggerated slow motion in which every detail was intensified. Reality itself was etched deeper. Breathing became an involuntary action and one was keenly aware of every breath. The darkness outside was heavier, the lamps in the room brighter, almost blindingly bright. He did not know why. Perhaps it was the effects of Jade's zombi powder, or Carbe's nasty antidote, or maybe it was only fear at work. He admitted he had never faced as formidable an enemy as Jean-Pierre Sardou, not even the vengeful, unyielding, and unforgiving Hammond Maxwell of Falconhurst. Hammond knew how to hate. Sardou understood hating and killing. It was like a life's work with Sardou. And, God knew, he'd learned the treachery of the lovely girl watching him from the shadows. He could not at the moment think of a person, animal, or reptile on earth more treacherous and heartless than the incredible beauty Jade.

He was aware of men talking in muted tones in a rear room of the ruined old villa. He could not tell how many there were. Maybe it didn't even matter. Jade's men and Sardou's slavers were everywhere: in the yard, on the docks, in the whaleboats and aboard the brigantine. More odds stacked against him by those mindless, drunken gods who controlled his destiny and who had been created in man's greediest image.

He drew a deep breath and moved his gaze from Sardou's face to Jade's and back again. Sardou and Jade appeared totally relaxed, and they watched him with an almost detached coolness.

Sardou said, "My old friend and traveling companion—"

"And partner in theft."

"That, too. As well as being the scion, according to you, of a poverty-stricken Alabama branch of the Lavedon dynasty. A family wing I never heard of in my life until I met you . . . You mind saying why you were fool enough to come here armed only with a gun that is useless to you? Even if you used it, you'd never get out of that door alive. Why don't you put it aside? We could talk easier, and you look such a fool standing there holding it."

"You worry too much about appearances, Sardou." Tommy exhaled heavily. "You and Jade have been shipping blacks to Maduro from Jade Noir."

Sardou shrugged. "I sell slaves, as I told you I would, from any source I can get them, old friend."

"Don't call me your friend. The very thought makes me sick at my stomach. You are vermin, Sardou. Let's start easy. Where is Lily?"

"The little coffee-colored slut you carried along as baggage?"

"Where is Lily?"

Sardou smiled blandly. "I am afraid, old fellow, that Lily was in one of the first consignments shipped from here to Maduro. She was fractious, rebellious, in need of a good horse-fucking. Some of the men gave that to her and now, much more docile, I think you'll be pleased to know Lily will make some belle a lovely housemaid . . . for life, of course."

"You son of a bitch."

"Sticks and stones." Sardou grinned at him.

"And Masse?" Tommy glanced toward Jade. She had not

moved; she seemed like a statue across the doorway from him. "Masse, Sardou. The foreman of the Jade Noir farms. You've stolen him, too."

Sardou shrugged. "What's the point in all these recriminations, old pecker? I don't steal slaves, I buy them. You knew from the first, in Havana in fact, that was one of the principal reasons for my coming to Haiti."

"Only Masse wasn't for sale. He is an intelligent, educated man. He'll be destroyed by slavery up there. If this woman"—Tommy swung his left arm in a downward gesture toward Jade—"will sell you men like Masse, no man on this island is safe."

"That's hardly my problem. My single problem is filling out herds of one hundred healthy black animals by the time my ships come into this harbor. They must be in fast and out fast. That is my problem . . . Hell, Lavedon—that is your name, isn't it, Lavedon?—this Haiti is a sorry place to breed slaves. Most are undernourished. Half-starved, in fact. Crawling with bowel worms and dizzy with malaria. I haven't the time or the patience to cure or fatten them. I have to take the best I can get. But, in the name of God, I see no reason for you to be so shocked and outraged at that."

"Nothing you do shocks me, Sardou. And I'm damned if I see why I should pretend to be surprised that evil spews out of evil. . . . I'm sick of talking about it. You have something I want. I came here to get it. If you turn over that sack of gold I risked my life taking from Killinsworth, I may let you live."

Now Sardou laughed aloud, delightedly. "Let me live? What chance do you think you have of leaving this place alive? Look how careless and trusting you are. Jade has moved in on you, old cock, while you talked and hated me."

Tommy glanced at Jade, who had slithered like a shadow in deeper shadows across the old room. He felt a sudden surge of agony at her nearness. She had checkmated him again, moving lithely, a pumalike stealth in the faint sounds from other rooms, from the yard and docks, and the distant throb of those nightly drums. Hating her, he was still dazzled by the incredible vision of her, and by her animal, instinctive cleverness.

Most of all, he was impressed by the exaggerated glitter of

the knife point she pressed at his side, ready to thrust it into him.

Sardou said, "Why don't you toss me the gun, old son? You're not going to need it where you're going."

Tommy drew a deep breath, shrugged and tossed the gun to Sardou. Jean-Pierre caught the weapon and casually thrust it under his belt. Jade seemed to melt away, moving a few feet from Tommy, across the open doorway.

"There," Sardou said, "isn't this much more comfortable?"

"I want that money, Sardou," Tommy said. "I risked my life for it. I earned it."

"Talk like that can speed the moment of your death, old man."

"Even if Jade knifes me, Sardou, I'm going to kill you."

Sardou's face blanched, his cheeks going pallid and rigid. His whole demeanor altered in that second. From a casual, taunting, catlike man smiling his superiority, he changed—his eyes shadowy and murderous, his whole body taut.

"You're not going to kill anybody, you son of a bitch. Not anymore. Never again." Sardou strode to a heavy old mahogany armoire and opened its hand-carved doors. He hefted the bag of gold and threw it out on the floor between them.

Tommy heard Jade's sharp intake of breath at the unique sound the Incan gold made striking heavily on the flooring. Something happened in her face. She was no longer looking at him, or at Sardou. Her gaze was transfixed, focused on that old cloth bag bulging with wealth from the Andes.

Sardou's voice was rancid and hard. "I knew this gold would bring you, even if nothing else would. It had to bring you to me. I planned it that way. It had to be this way. I wanted you to look on this gold. Nothing else would make it perfect. I wanted you to see—an emperor's wealth that you'll never touch, never live to spend."

Sardou stalked back and forth beyond the bag of gold. "God, how I've planned it. Ever since that moment back in Louisiana when I found you were the criminal bastard who had slain my dearest brother Paul in cold blood. In cowardly cold blood . . . I have been trailing you, thinking about you, you ill-begotten bastard. First, I was going to walk into those law offices where you impersonated my brother, God rest his angel soul. But just killing you, you bastard, that was not

enough. Oh, God no. Not nearly enough. I wanted you to die horribly—as you will—but not until that moment when you had looked at riches and thought you'd had the world in your grasp."

Sardou's voice soared to a raging howl. "Look at it, you killer of dear and innocent boys. You defiler of pure women. Look at it. Gold. All the money on earth. But you'll never have it. Go ahead, bastard, touch it, try to touch it, try to pick it up."

Sardou stood taut, his booted legs apart, his body arched, the handgun gripped in his fist and its mouth fixed on Tommy's belly.

When Tommy did not move, Sardou screamed at him. "Pick it up. Try to pick it up. You may as well. You're going to die anyway."

Tommy drew a deep breath and stepped forward in that terrible slow motion which had become the norm in this infected world. He kept moving forward, staring at the bag, not looking at Sardou, but gauging the moment when he could leap upon him.

He heard the hammer on the gun clicked back and the gun raised. Tommy gasped aloud, straightened, ready to take the bullet that was going to kill him. But that strange, slow-motion, unreal, stop-action charade was not over. He heard the whisper of movement behind him, the whistle of the thrown knife, the thud as it imbedded itself in Sardou's body.

In intensified slowness, Sardou dropped the gun. It seemed forever before the weapon struck the floor and the sound of it reached Tommy. Then Sardou crumpled, his pallid face contorted. He struck the floor, his eyes staring at Tommy and at Jade, who had moved forward into the brilliant lamplight.

Tommy knelt beside Sardou, tested the pulse in his throat.

"Get away from me, you son of a bitch," Sardou muttered through the blood clotting in his mouth.

Tommy shrugged and then smiled in a savage way. "Sorry, Sardou Lavedon. Looks like this is what you get for your sins, eh? You think God forgets, but it looks like he doesn't. I'm truly sorry about this, about all of it."

Sardou's anguished eyes stared up at him, his face contorted with the pain of the steel in his chest. His breathing was already thready and irregular. Blood leaked from the

corner of his mouth. He did not attempt to speak again. He no longer cared about slaves, gold, wealth, women, or vengeance. He was already beyond all that and he knew it. His head slumped and he died quietly.

Tommy picked up the handgun from the floor near Sardou Lavedon's limp fist and stood up. He looked at Jade, feeling his belly go empty with that obsession for her that the sight of her would rouse in him into eternity. He'd seen few lovelier women in a career misspent in the company of lovely females, beautiful predatory women. The tawny golden sleekness of her ceramic flesh glowed in the lamplight. Her slanted green eyes were empty of emotion: luminous, large, and as empty as cat's eyes.

He sighed, watching her. He had truly learned one truth. It was possible—very possible indeed—to desire and despise a woman in the same instant in time. He felt his eyes burn with tears of loss, even while he watched her gazing abstractedly at the bag heavy with Incan gold, and hated her.

Jade ignored the pistol in Tommy's hand. She spoke aloud, and three black men in cotton pants and bare to the waist entered the room. She nodded toward the bag on the floor. "Take it out to the wagon. I'll be out. We'll leave soon."

She went on standing silently while her blacks toted the gold from the room into the lowering darkness.

She turned her head at last and glanced casually at Tommy, as if he were some stranger she had never seen before.

"Don't try to stop me," she said in a low, chilled tone. "I'll kill you if I have to, as I killed Sardou."

Tommy said nothing. The temptation to stop her surged through him and died away. Sardou lay dead. This was slaughter enough. It was over. She had saved his life, not because she gave a damn in hell about him—she didn't—but because she could take the gold from Sardou only by killing him. It was that simple. He could take the gold, but maybe she had earned it. And maybe she deserved it. Somewhere, out in that tropical night, Captain Killinsworth and his thwarted pirate partners were on the trail of that king's ransom. Let her deal with them. He sighed. Leave her to God and to captain Killinsworth.

He glanced through the open door to the ship riding at anchor in the rising tide. That ship would sail on the crest, on

the first outgoing run of the water. He would be on it. There was nothing for him here. There never had been, but he'd had to learn that for himself the brutal way. The workers permanent in Icres's employ were loyal not to Icres, but to Marie-Verlaine and Jade. Marie-Verlaine now controlled everything at Plantation Jade Noir. There was nothing he could do for Icres, nothing he could ever have done. Icres had been doomed long before Tommy had come to Haiti. Marie-Verlaine and her daughter, richer than Croesus, dominated the plantation now as they never had before and Icres was trapped, like a fly caught in the silver strands of some silken web, slowly being devoured, even the marrow sucked from his bones. Not even Icres's own gods could help him now.

Jade turned and walked out of the house. He did not attempt to delay her. He let the hammer down on the handgun and pushed it under his belt. He walked out and retrieved Ira Caymen from his hiding place.

When he removed the gag from the black detective's mouth, Ira whined, "I'm hungry."

Tommy shrugged. "We all are, Ira. All of us."

He prodded Ira with the gun, walking out to the dark pier where a single lantern glowed.

"Did you tell Sardou?" a man said to Tommy. "We've got to sail. We must sail with the tide or we miss twelve hours at sea. I told him that."

"Sardou is not going to sail with us," Tommy said. "I am taking over this shipment for him."

The man shrugged. "Aye, then. I'm your captain. Don't give a damn who is in charge of my cargo as long as I get me cut."

They stepped off the pier into a waiting whaleboat. Seamen rowed them across the ice-clear, choppy waters to the brigantine. The water was like transparent glass. The night stars seemed to twinkle along the white sand far below the surface.

When they came aboard ship, Tommy turned the bound Caymen over to a seaman. He spoke to the captain. "I want this man entered in the log. Marked paid in full, a gift for Monsieur and Madame Vigneaux of New Orleans."

The captain spoke to a mate, who relayed orders to the bosun, who shouted for the crew to turn to. Sails were loosened, run up the lines.

Tommy took a lantern and went down mid decks to where the slaves were shackled. The place was already a stinking purgatory. He held his breath, searching quickly until he located Masse.

Masse stared up at him, speechless. Tommy loosened the chains on the big man and walked him up to the afterdeck. The ship was already in motion on the tide.

"You'll have to swim for it," Tommy said, gazing toward the receding shoreline.

Masse laughed. "It will be my pleasure, *mon ami*."

Masse clasped Tommy tightly in his arms for a long moment. Then he turned and dove cleanly into the clear water with hardly a splash. He cut through the water with strong overhand strokes, slithering through it like a porpoise. Tommy watched him for a long time, wondering what Marie-Verlaine's face would look like when Masse appeared at her door. Or would Masse even return to Jade Noir? Perhaps he was far too smart at last. Well, it was in the laps of the gods now. . . .

For a long time after he could no longer see Masse gliding across the bay, Tommy went on standing on the afterdeck. Seamen still shouted. Sails were unfurled, and the ship lurched suddenly when a mainsail snapped, belly full of wind. Well, here he was, on the open deck of a filthy ship, deep in the Caribbean. Nowhere. Still penniless. Still rootless and on the run. How the gods must be raging with laughter over their tankards of ale and bowls of Haitian rum. He didn't give a damn. He was still alive and maybe that was all that mattered, maybe that was the only answer on this dark planet. Maybe that was what it was all about.

He sighed and braced himself against the forward lunging as the sails bellied out and the ship shuddered, moving north in the night.

EPILOGUE

After the eternal twisting and winding upriver, the brigantine sails were furled, stowed, lines hauled in, and the now awkward vessel was towed to the pier at the Esplanade Docks. The dark stain of sunset purpled beyond Algiers, across one of the bends in the big river, the bayous, and the ragged horizon where storm clouds moiled, clotted and black.

Tommy stood near the rail without even a handbag, sans luggage, sans fortune, sans work, still without a name of his own and lacking any of the riches he'd set out so confidently to achieve. It looked as if the capricious gods were not yet quite finished with him.

At least, he was home again. New Orleans. The look and feel and very smell of the place was unlike any other on earth. Despite his sense of depression, he felt his heart lurch slightly and then pulse faster. New Orleans! One couldn't deny the magic of it.

Idly Tommy watched the seamen prepare to lower and secure the long, rope-railed gangplank. They were near enough now so that Tommy could see the people ashore: white, black, from every port and every town, and all of them confident, employed, swaggering along the waterfront. The brick structures of the city reared beyond. He sidled toward the gangplank, anxious to reach the piers and lose himself in that faceless mob. This was his last, best hope for survival. The Wanted Posters awaited him; he would gamble on that.

The last river breezes touched at his fevered face and caught at the sweated curls along his brow. The kiss of the breeze was almost like a benediction, a farewell, the final end

to his long masquerade and his unyielding battle for freedom and some kind of equality. Never before had he been so dissatisfied, empty bellied, and defeated. He had escaped Haiti with a full skin and not much more. It seemed to him he had lost everything at last. He had reached higher this time, risked more and lost more. He had been lonely in the past, but never as alone as now, unable to look ahead even one hour in the gods' fouled-up scheme of existence in this drab world. He was still legally black. One drop of Negroid blood took care of that in the enlightened South of 1826. He was not free, and never had been. Freedom was a fantasy and a lie. He had grabbed for it, and pretended to own it for a little while, but he had never really escaped the manacles at his wrists and ankles. They were there even when they were invisible.

He could even wish his skin was black. This would effectively end his masquerade: He could accept the cruel existence of slavery then, because he could no longer pretend to be anything except a *nigger*, a mudsill.

He was so damned tired. He did not see how he could go on running. Yet how could he stop, even for a little while? Though Jean-Pierre Sardou Lavedon was dead, the Lavedon family still sought the man who had slain Paul Lavedon and then brazenly impersonated him. Jean-Pierre's death would not ease the tension. More of the vengeful Lavedons would stalk him. He could no longer pretend to be Paul Lavedon, the attorney, though he was a good lawyer. He could not, with any sense of security, even go on being Tommy Verder, either. Even that name was stolen and a lie.

He winced. Once he'd gotten a sense of ironic achievement deceiving all those arrogant white men who thought themselves lordly and superior. He had swaggered among them as a peer. He had supped at their tables and fucked their women. There had been a fierce pleasure in the deception, but now it was all over. If he were caught now, he would be at least manacled, jailed, and returned to serfdom. He might even be castrated or slain on sight in compliance with the Hammond Maxwell Falconhurst Wanted Posters which called him a mad dog and promised a small fortune in rewards, "dead or alive."

He stared out across the city. He could run north, but he

had been there. He had suffered the insidious kind of racism and cold hatred of the northern whites. This treatment was far more debasing than the open slavery of the South. There was simply no place for him, a black man with a white skin and a stubborn heart. He could see no way for him to exist except as Calico, the Falconhurst fugitive.

He sighed out the inner rages still simmering inside him. He was so tired, so goddamn tired. He had run so far and for so long, without rest or peace or security. In this moment of exhaustion he was fed up with the masquerade of the past seven years; he was sick of playing a role twenty-four hours a day. His skin was not black, but he was not allowed to take pride in his own race, or pretend to be white.

Others attempted to edge ahead of him with their baggage at the gangplank, but he firmly asserted himself. He would be the first off this ship. Then, smiling inwardly, he recalled the old adage, Never hurry to be hung.

Still, he couldn't loiter here, either. Only God and the harbor police knew what messages had passed between New Orleans and Havana, and even Haiti. He was still being hunted.

When the gate was opened, Tommy came swiftly down the gangplank. For a moment his legs trembled when he touched the unyielding flooring of the dock. He wavered on sea legs, still unconsciously adapting to the pitch and yawl of the ship. This was what one did: one adapted, or he perished.

He looked about on the pier. He had no goal in mind, no place to go. There was no one he wanted to see. He thanked his besotted gods that New Orleans was a huge and bustling seaport. A man, if he was smart enough, could lose himself in its twisted, congested streets.

He hurried across the brightly lamp-illumined debarking area. The shadowy streets promised safety and concealment, a place to rest.

He'd almost reached the first shadows of the loading halls, the piles of lumber, bales of cotton, sacks of grain, naval stores, and was almost breathing freely for the first time in God knew how long, when a man stepped suddenly in front of him. The man snagged at his arm. The man said, "Mr. Verder? Mr. Tommy Verder?"

Tommy stopped as if poled. The man was at ease, unhur-

ried, slightly built, and clad in black broadcloth suit. His face, manner, clothing, even his derby hat was faintly and threateningly familiar.

Tommy stepped back, remembering. He had been accosted by this same little man on a pier precisely like this months ago when he'd been fleeing with Lily, running to board the *St. Genevieve*.

"You are Mr. Verder, are you not? Mr. Tommy Verder?"

"Why are you following me like this? What do you want?" Tommy stared down into the man's untroubled face. He even remembered the name. Stanford Billips. "Why are you chasing me like this, Billips? What in hell could you possibly want?"

The little man seemed flattered that Tommy recalled his name. He almost smiled. Tommy looked for a gun, the telltale bulge of a weapon in the jacket pocket, the hidden holster. He found nothing suspicious.

"I want to talk to you," Billips said. "I've been looking for you for so long. Why can't you give me two minutes, Mr. Verder? Hear me out. Then if you want to walk away, I won't try to stop you. You see, Mr. Verder, I've been hired to find you. Talk to you. A most important message. But I cannot spend the rest of my life running you down."

Tommy shrugged, watching him. "All right. What do you want?"

"Do you know a Mrs. Anne-Jeanne Casale? Of Meadow Leas Plantation?"

"Are you from the Lavedon people?"

"No, sir. I am from the estate of Mrs. Anne-Jeanne Casale."

Tommy's heart sank. "Estate? Is she dead?"

Stanford Billips nodded. "I regret to inform you that she is. It was a tragic thing. It happened suddenly. She went into New Orleans on her annual shopping spree. She was, you may know, deathly afraid of cholera, and always avoided New Orleans during the season of plague. But this year she delayed too long in New Orleans. She was looking for someone. It may have been you she sought. I don't know. I know only that the plague struck while she was still in the city. She left at once, of course, racing in her tightly closed carriage with incense burning, magic powders, and every kind of potion to ward off Bronze John, the cholera. But somehow

she was stricken with the fatal disease. She died with it, as her husband had ahead of her, most agonizedly, most horribly.'' Mr. Billips shuddered. ''She felt as if to die of the dreaded cholera was her destiny and at the last she accepted it. She died quite calmly.''

''I am glad for that,'' Tommy said, remembering Anne-Jeanne, the way they had made love together, the way she had clung to him, insatiable. The way she told him she'd been only half-alive until he came along like the prince to waken Sleeping Beauty with a kiss. ''Only you did it with a gorgeous hard cock. I can't live without you. I don't want to live without you.''

Tommy felt his eyes burn with unshed tears. ''I'm truly sorry,'' he said.

''We all are,'' Mr. Billips said. He nodded his derbied head. ''She was one of a kind. Totally honest. Totally direct. Loving. Sincere. She would tolerate no bullshit—such as the Lavedons and the other cousins tried to pile on her as she lay dying. That's why I've been looking for you, Mr. Verder. You are her sole heir.''

''What?''

''Anne-Jeanne Casale left everything to you in an iron-strong will that cannot be broken or contested. If it were ever broken, her hated cousins would not profit anyway. Her estate would all go to charity. Those are the only two options possible under law. To charity, or to you, in toto, Mr. Verder. Now, do you see why I've hunted you so long and so diligently?''

Tommy sagged against the wall of the building. Billips went on talking in his quiet, unassuming voice. Anne-Jeanne Casale had left Tommy her estate, Meadow Leas, three hundred thousand dollars in cash, a half million in gilt-edge investments, two thousands acres of prime cotton land up there in the Delta country, plus all of her slaves.

For a long time, Tommy remained silent, stunned. At last he said, ''And what's the kicker, Mr. Billips?''

''The kicker? There is none, so far as my firm is aware.''

''And what must I do to claim the fortune?''

Billips spread his hands. ''Nothing. Move into the manor house at Meadow Leas. Claim what is rightfully yours. There

may be a few papers to sign, but nothing more. It's all yours, Mr. Verder, waiting for you."

Tommy stared at the little man, his throat aching. Nothing to do, nothing stood in the way of claiming a fortune worth millions. Nothing. Nothing except the Lavedons. The bounty hunters from Falconhurst, and Hammond Maxwell himself.

He shook his head. He might defeat the others, but he could never beat Ham Maxwell, no matter how rich he was. To Ham Maxwell, he was a nigger, and until he was enslaved as a black, or dead, Hammond Maxwell would never rest. Like Tommy's own drunken gods, Ham Maxwell would hound him to the grave and maybe even beyond. Nothing stood between him and that fortune except Ham Maxwell and his own perverse gods.

His eyes filled with tears. After a long moment, he sighed. "Ah, well. My mammy always said, 'What goes over the devil's back comes up under his belly.' "

"What are you saying, sir?"

Tommy smiled and looked at the little man, the messenger either from heaven or hell. Ham Maxwell was not going to let him live to enjoy that fortune. Ham Maxwell was still Tommy's own personal avenging angel. Ham's bullet on that Mississippi showboat had shattered his gut but had not stopped him. Ham's Wanted Posters hounded him at every corner he turned, kept him running and unable to rest. Even now, when Hammond Maxwell, way over in Alabama, seemed no immediate threat, it was Ham who finally stopped and defeated and stood between him and Anne-Jeanne's largesse.

A muscle worked in Tommy's taut jawline.

He sighed. Oh, he was beaten, all right. Anne-Jeanne had, in her loving way, bequested all her worldly goods to him. Wealth beyond his wildest imaginings. And all he had to do was to return to Meadow Leas, sign a few papers, and claim it all. Dear God. Claim Anne-Jeanne's inheritance and face Ham Maxwell's accusations, threats, lies, persecution, and the hang rope the Lavedons and Maxwell had waiting for him up at Meadow Leas.

Well, his gods had had their greatest jest yet, their biggest laugh. It was clear enough. He could never go back to Meadow Leas. He could claim nothing. He could not stop running. He could not rest. He could never escape the flight,

the masquerades. He could only sidle into the darkness, lose himself in the shadows, sink lower even than the lowest black mudsill, the only place Ham Maxwell would allow him, the only place where he could hide, where the law and the gods and the Lavedons and the Maxwells could never find him, where they would not even bother to look for him.

He shook his head. "No, Mr. Billips. Thank you. But no. My name is not Tommy Verder." Tears welled in his eyes, spilled along his pallid cheeks. He heard the distant laughter of maniacal gods and he shivered. "I am a black man. A nigger. My name is Calico."